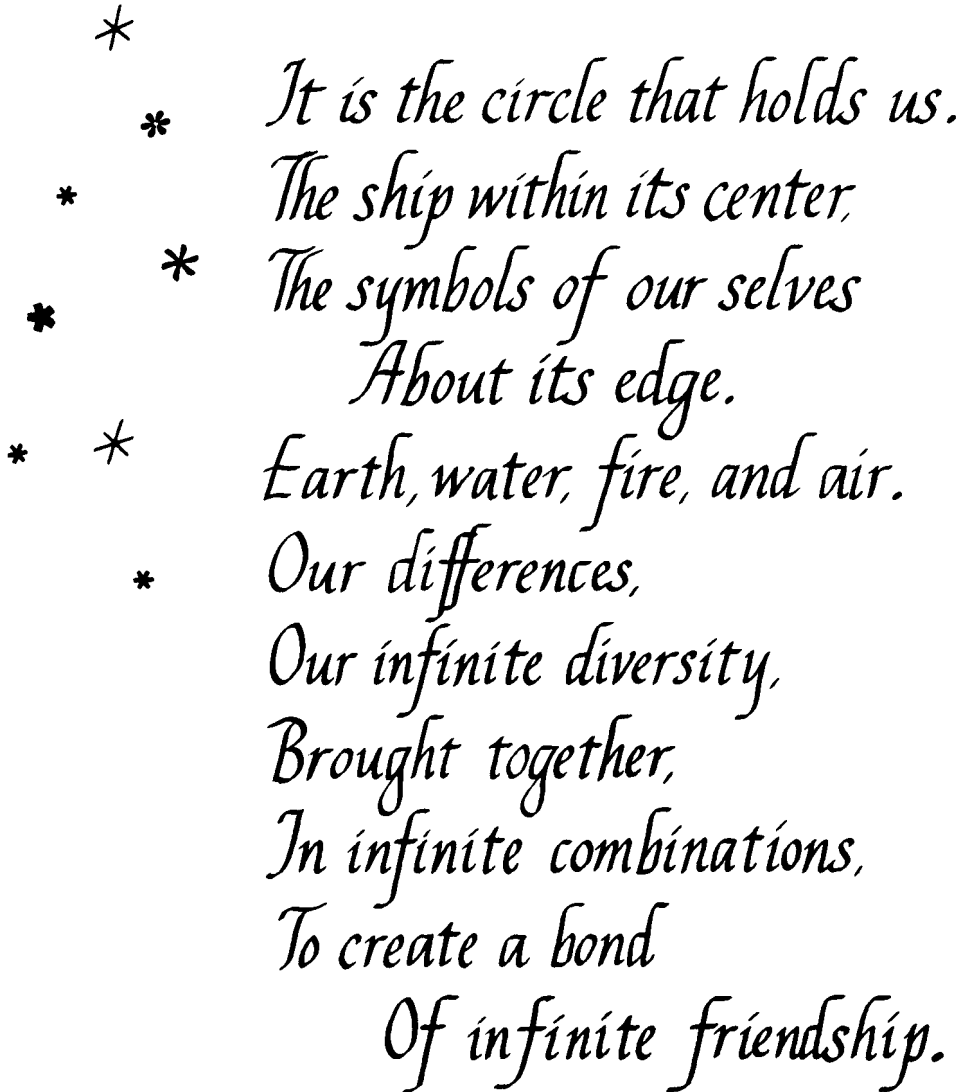




MIND MELD V



MIND MELD V

"She's got the right name . . . You treat her like a lady and she'll always bring you home."

Dr. Leonard McCoy
"Encounter at Farpoint"



In Person Price: \$10.00

First Class (US): \$12.75

Editor



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Elkridge, MD 21227



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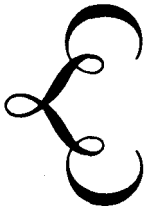
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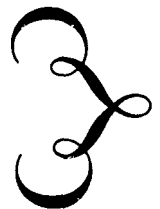


*"You'll learn to care for yourselves, with
our help . . . You'll learn to build for
yourselves, think for yourselves, and what
you create is yours."*

Captain James Kirk
"The Apple"

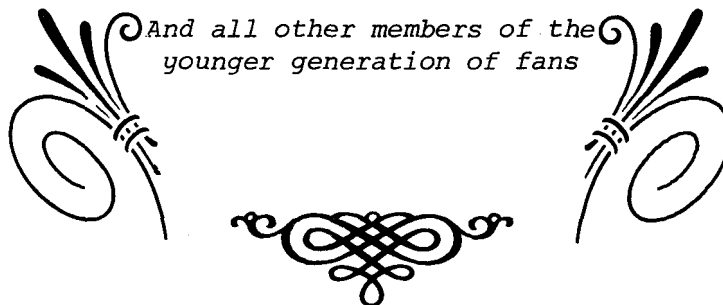


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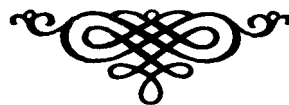


TO:

*Kiel Mitchell Maddox
Rebecca Lynn Jarvis
Kellen Mitchell Maddox
Jessica Lee Anna Swenton*



*And all other members of the
younger generation of fans*



*Our Legacy must be handed down,
And live beyond our days.
The future lies in your hearts and minds
And the imaginary haze.
So take our spirit of adventure,
Our dream to touch the sun
And add to it your days of youth
For you are the new generation.*

- Michael P. Hoffmaster





T'was the night before printing, and all through the house, not a desktop was clear of signs of layout.

Well, what can I say -- it is, once again, the night before Mind Meld goes to the printer and I have, as per tradition, waited until now to write the editorial. One of these days, I will break tradition!

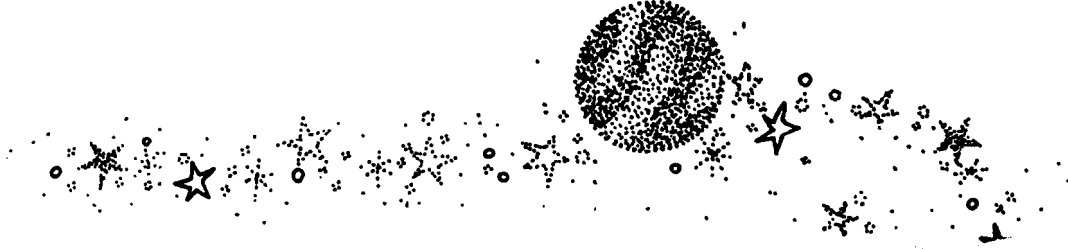
There are several new names in this issue of Mind Meld and I welcome them all. I predict many of them will become popular names in Star Trek fan fiction. However, I would like to take the time to welcome two contributors specifically. By no means are Laurie Huff and Bev Zuk new to fandom, but I am pleased to have their artwork represented in Mind Meld for the first time. I hope their involvement will continue.

I was honored when Mind Meld III won its Surak Awards and even more honored with the nominations Mind Meld IV received in the recent ballot. I encourage everyone to participate in the nomination and voting process for these awards in the years to come.

I would like to say thank you to a number of people. First of all, I'd like to thank my niece and, more importantly, my friend, Cheryl, who insists she is not a "trekker" -- yet constantly comes up with "poetry on demand". Thanks for my inside front cover poetry once again -- as well as being a constant source of support. Second, a special thanks to Mary Mills, who filled in with "art on demand" when an artist backed out one day short of the art deadline. She was able to finish an illo for me well within the time needed for a negative to be made and taken to the printer.

Another special thanks goes to Michael P. Hoffmaster who wrote the poem for the dedication page after I described what I wanted. As you can see, I've dedicated this issue to the new generation of fans -- fans that are about 12 and under. These fans should be nurtured to carry on what the "dinosaurs" (no -- I'm not one yet!) of fandom have started. I hope fandom is for them what it has been for me.

continued -



This year has already had its up and downs. My first love -- the Washington Redskins -- won the Superbowl. Needless to say, I was ecstatic. Then, in March, my chief proofreader -- and friend -- Karen Maddox, gave birth to my godson, Kiel Mitchell Maddox. After his birth, the proofreading chores were transferred to my roommate, Jenne Bybel (oh, joy!), with my thanks to her.

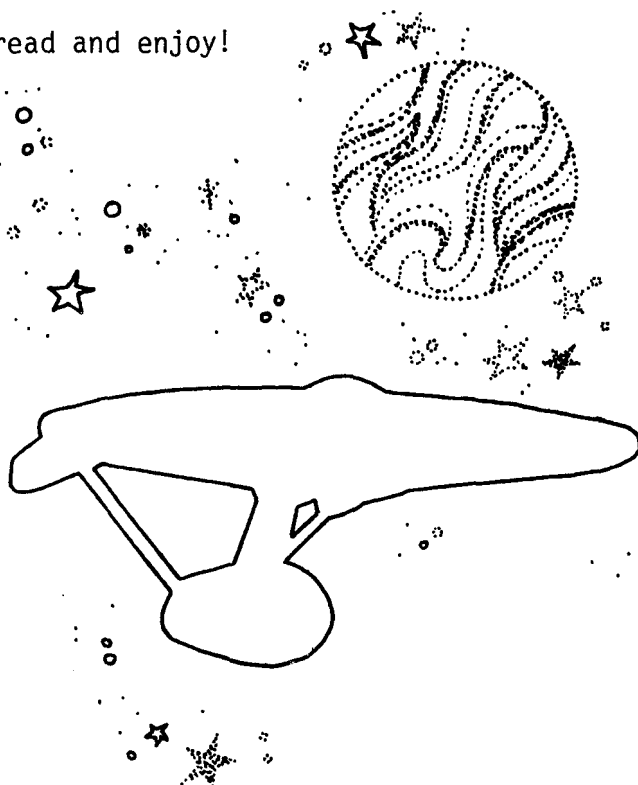
However, during that time, there was also sadness. Fandom lost Gina Godwin to a terrible tragedy. She had been a part of Mind Meld in the past as well as an active member of fandom. Both I, personally, and fandom will miss her.

Other votes of appreciation go to Caren Parnes for her artwork, Ginna LaCroix for her constant support during my periods of crisis while editing various stories; my brother, Dick, for his help, and anyone I may have forgotten (this is beginning to sound like one of those "acceptance speeches" at the Academy Awards!).

Last, but not least, I thank my contributors and readers. Without you, there wouldn't be a Mind Meld to publish or a reason for it. I thank you for your support, comments and criticisms. Keep those LoCs coming!

I think you will be pleased with this issue. I do want your comments -- both good and bad. However, there is one note -- you may notice there is a lack of "short stories" in this issue of Mind Meld. Unfortunately, I only received a few, and of those few, only two appear in these pages. Though I prefer to keep a good balance of poetry, short stories and longer stories, I cannot print what I don't receive. (Writers, in case you're wondering -- this is a hint!)

Now, read and enjoy!



*Lijay,
Sandy
H*

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Front cover artwork: Connie Faddis

Back cover artwork: Caren Parnes

Poetry inside front cover: Cheryl Zier

Calligraphy inside front cover: Myrtle Mitchell

Other borders by Caro Hedge and Shellie Whild

SILHOUETTES

Kirk:

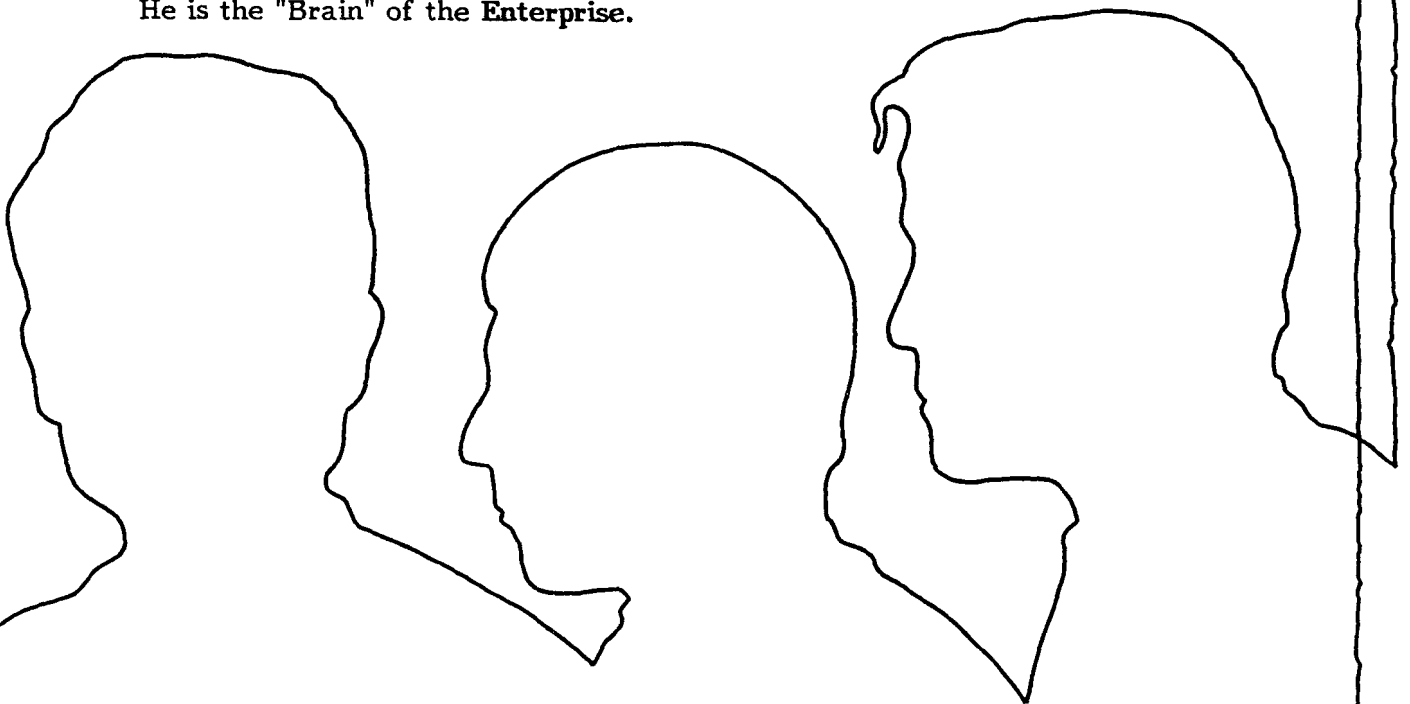
Like the ship captains of old,
He commands with an aura of Authority.
Impetuous, putting his life on the line,
For his friends and his crew.
Facing dangers without a thought,
Of the consequences of his actions.
He is the "Soul" of the **Enterprise**.

McCoy:

Brilliant surgeon, tender heart
And hands.
Feeling everyone's pain,
As well as his own.
Hating the transporter,
And landing parties.
But following his Captain,
Wherever asked to go.
He is the "Heart" of the **Enterprise**.

Spock:

Logical, intelligent, denying feelings,
That are beneath
The thin veneer of Vulcanism.
Bantering with McCoy over
Insignificant things, getting the last word.
He too, follows his Captain.
He is the "Brain" of the **Enterprise**.



Where are the Snows



of Yesterday

By: Barbara Trimble
Art by: Cami Forsell

The **Enterprise** cruised towards Starbase Twelve at warp factor three. A lavish party was being held in the main recreation hall in honor of the ship's distinguished passenger, Dr. Cassandra Patterson. The 33-year old research scientist -- and former crewmember of the **Enterprise** -- slowly sipped her drink, thinking how good it felt to be back among the living once again. Three years surrounded by laboratory animals on the remote planet of Almatheas Seven had not provided the most intelligent of conversations.

Cassie, as her friends called her, was casually conversing with Dr. Leonard McCoy when she noticed Spock's entrance into the room. Before her transfer to Almatheas Seven, Cassie worked closely under Spock's careful guidance. Although they were colleagues, Cassie had always thought of him as sort of a father figure. She set her drink on the bar, and turned to McCoy. "Would you excuse me for just a moment, Doctor?"

"Why, of course," McCoy said, in his best southern drawl.

Cassie crossed the room to where the Vulcan stood with his back toward her. "It's been a long time, Spock. How have you been?"

Spock turned, making every effort to contain the pleasure of seeing a respected colleague and protege once again. Aware that other eyes were upon them, he spoke formally. "Dr. Patterson, it is indeed an honor to have you aboard the **Enterprise**."

"Are you avoiding me?" she asked in a teasing manner. "You haven't spoken to me since I beamed aboard this afternoon."

"I have merely been preoccupied with my duties as First Officer. I meant no offense."

"Well, I'll let you off the hook this time." Cassie smiled. "Is there somewhere a little more quiet where we can talk? We have a lot to catch up on."

"There is a briefing room on this level. Will that be satisfactory?"





"That'll be fine."

Spock stepped back out of the way allowing Cassie to pass before him.

Across the hall, McCoy was trying to be inconspicuous in his observation of the pair. He was thoroughly intoxicated with Spock's social antics. Seeing the Vulcan apparently taken by a woman was not an everyday occurrence, and he was savoring every tiny morsel.

Decked out in full-dress uniform, Captain James T. Kirk joined the festivities. Picking up a drink from a steward, Kirk waded his way through the crowd to where McCoy was lurking. "Where's our guest of honor?" When McCoy did not reply, he followed the doctor's unwavering gaze. "Oh, I see she's finally caught up with Spock."

"Oh sure, they're old colleagues, but I'll bet you a bottle of Saurian Brandy there's more there than meets the eye." The doctor turned to face his friend.

"Why do you say that?" Kirk asked.

McCoy's mouth turned up in a devilish grin. "Just a hunch."

Annoyed, Kirk frowned. "Get your mind out of the gutter."

McCoy spread his hands in defense. "Who says Vulcans can only do it every seven years? I mean, don't you ever wonder if they can hold off -- save it for an occasion like this?"

"I reiterate, get your mind out of the gutter. You should know Spock by now. He doesn't get emotionally involved with anyone." Kirk paused. "You're letting your imagination get away from you."

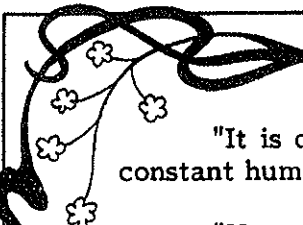


Cassie and Spock arrived at the briefing room. The doors parted, and they entered -- a blast of cool air hitting them directly in the face. "Once again your choice of retreat is perfect," Cassie commented with a smile. "I'm just not ready to take on full-scale crowds just yet."

Cassie moved around the room, her long, sea-green hostess gown rustling like leaves in a gentle, summer's breeze. She was by no means a Greek Goddess, but her simple features created a special beauty all their own.

Sensing Spock's burning gaze upon her back, Cassie turned slowly. "Being back on the Enterprise makes me feel like I've never really been gone. It's almost as if the clock stopped when I left, and is just now beginning to tick away again." Cassie put a hand to her forehead. "We came here to catch up, and here I am rambling on-and-on." She sat down in a nearby chair.





"It is quite all right. Three years is indeed a long period to have been without constant human companionship." Spock commented, clasping his hands behind his back.

"You make it sound like I was exiled or something. It really wasn't that bad. I had my animals to keep me company. The good thing about them was that they never argued with my findings, no matter how illogical they appeared."

"Need I point out . . . " Spock stopped in mid-sentence when he realized Cassie was baiting him into an argument.

"Oh, c'mon, Spock, don't let me down. You don't know how I've longed for one of your famous lectures on the illogical human mind." Cassie laughed briefly, then caught his questioning frown. "Skip it! So, tell me what's been happening with the *Enterprise* since that showdown with the Romulans out near the Neutral Zone?"

"There have been far too many to itemize each event."

"Then, just give me the highlights." Cassie sat back in her chair waiting expectantly. "And, would you please sit down?"

The Vulcan chose a seat across from Cassie. "On Planet Q, the captain discovered that Kodos, the Executioner was still alive. In a series of unfortunate events, Kodos died at the hands of his mentally unbalanced daughter, Lenore. On two separate occasions, both Captain Kirk and myself were brought before review boards for court-martials. At one point, the *Enterprise* was hurled back through time to late 20th Century earth. It was there that we learned of the extensive paranoia humans had regarding the concept of 'little green men'." With the last few words, he raised a dubious eyebrow.

"Sounds like you've been busy."

"Our missions thus far have proven to be quite fascinating." Spock intertwined his arms across his chest. "Now that your research project is completed, will you be transferring back to the *Enterprise*?"

"Afraid not. When I left Almatheas Seven, I hung up my lab coat for good." Cassie turned her head away from his stare. "I'm all through with Starfleet, Spock. I'm retiring from the service."

"Retiring? I don't understand."

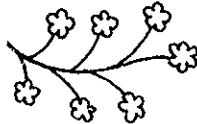
"Let's just say that the option came up in a discussion with the upper echelon at Headquarters and I accepted their terms." The doctor was still unable to meet Spock's gaze.

"If I may be so bold, what are your future plans? Will you be returning home?"

"Do you always have to dwell on tomorrow, Spock? You shouldn't plan your life around something that hasn't happened yet, any more than we can ask where are the snows of yesterday because they left us with fond memories." Cassie looked at Spock and smiled. "No, my logical friend, start living for today. Count on tomorrow, and you may find there isn't one." Her voice trailed off in a manner which Spock was unable to

explain. "I really should be getting back to the party. After all, the captain must have gone to a lot of trouble to arrange it for me. We'll talk again." She quickly stood and left, before the Vulcan could ask any more questions.

As the door slid closed behind the woman, Spock steeped his fingers deep in thought. He did not remember Cassie being so philosophical before. She had learned to shield her mind to perfection. However, the few thoughts he had read were filled with turmoil. And that was of concern to him.



Cassie returned to the gala alone. McCoy jabbed Kirk in the ribs with an elbow as she walked across the hall to join them. "I'm sorry about up-and-leaving like that, but I saw an opportunity to corner Spock, and I seized it."

"Like you seized the opportunity to beat him in the chess finals at Starbase Twelve three years ago?" McCoy smirked.

"Of course, doctor. I wasn't going to sway the game on account of Spock's Vulcan pride. He would have shown me no mercy under the same circumstances."

"True," Kirk added with a grin, "but I'll never forget the look on his face when it was announced he'd be opposing a human in the championship instead of a computer. And on top of it all, the challenger turned out to be you."

"It was the first match he had ever lost to a human," McCoy laughed. "Spock was unbearable for a week. Every free minute of his time was spent right here critiquing his losing move."

"I had no idea he had taken it so hard," Cassie said. "After all, he was the one who'd taught me the game in the first place."

Kirk took a sip of his dwindling brandy. "I'm sure he's over it by now."

"Yeah, ole Spock isn't one to hold a grudge. That would be admitting he was part human." McCoy commented.

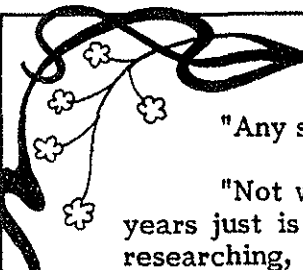
"Enough about Spock, I want to hear about Dr. Patterson's work since leaving the *Enterprise*." Captain Kirk interrupted.

"Since I am officially retired, would you please call me Cassie? Dr. Patterson has its clout as a title, but it makes me sound like I should be grey-haired and using a cane to get around."

Kirk took the lead. "All right, Cassie. Tell us about your work. Was it worth it?"

"The main reason for my transfer to Almatheas Seven was to spend time researching certain diseases. One of which was Webber's Syndrome, a progressive and fatal disease resembling 20th Century earth's Leukemia."





"Any success?" Kirk queried.

"Not with a cure, if that's what you mean. As Dr. McCoy could tell you, three years just is not enough time to develop anything substantial. You just get started researching, trying out different therapies when it's time to move on."

"Now that you're retired from the service, you can spend all the time you want on the project as a civilian," McCoy said, then added, "I'm sure you could obtain funding from any number of agencies."

Cassie's mood changed abruptly. "If you gentlemen will excuse my rudeness, I think I'm going to call it an evening. I'm not caught up from all the travelling yet, and I am a bit tired."

"May I walk you to your quarters?" Kirk offered.

"Dr. McCoy and I have to discuss my pre-separation physical. Maybe next time, Captain," Cassie apologized, taking the doctor's elbow. "Good night, and thank you for the lovely party. I really do feel like I've come home."



McCoy escorted Cassie to her assigned quarters. "What's this about a pre-separation physical?" he asked in a perplexed tone. "You were suppose to have submitted to one before your departure from Almatheas Seven."

"I did."

"Then what's the big mystery?"

"Come in, Dr. McCoy. We need to talk." Cassie led the doctor into her quarters.

"In all the time you were previously assigned to this ship, I don't ever recall being propositioned quite like that." He commented as he followed her, the lights flickering on as they crossed the threshold.

"Sorry to disappoint you, but that's not why I've asked you in." Cassie kicked off her shoes, moving to the desk where a small, black case lay on top. She opened the case, and retrieved an envelope, clutching it tightly between her fingers. She motioned to a vacant chair. "Please, sit down."

"Uh-oh, whenever someone tells me to sit down, it usually spells trouble." McCoy eased into the chair. "So, what's so secret that you couldn't tell the captain?"

"I believe this will explain everything," she said, handing the envelope to McCoy. "As one doctor to another, I trust I can count on you for total confidentiality."

McCoy took the package, removing its contents. He read the enclosed document; then read it a second time. With a concerned expression, he disbelievingly

raised his eyes to meet Cassie's. "Webber's Syndrome! Are you sure the diagnosis is correct?"

Cassie lay a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "Oh, the diagnosis is correct. God, how I wish it weren't. The day I found out, all I could think about was that the doctors had mixed up my test results with someone else's. However; I knew, deep down, the diagnosis was true."

"How long have you known about your condition? I mean, this is not something that just happens overnight."

"Webber's hasn't affected anyone in my family in over four generations. I was praying that it would skip the fifth. However, almost eight months after I transferred to Almatheas Seven, the first symptoms appeared. The progressive weakness, the excessive white blood cells . . . "

McCoy put two and two together to get five. "If you've been afflicted since then . . . "

"I'm in the final stages of the disease." Cassie finished the sentence. "It's only a matter of weeks, perhaps even days until the last phase begins and the inevitable occurs."

"I don't know what to say," McCoy said, his voice a whisper.

"There's nothing to say."

"The captain will have to be told."

"Why?" She protested. "It's my death we're talking about here."

"C'mon, use some of that logic Spock taught you." McCoy attempted to reason with Cassie. "The Enterprise is his ship, and should your time come before we reach Starbase Twelve, I think it's only fair he be forewarned."

Cassie was firm. "I'd like to keep this as quiet as possible. The fewer people who have to know, the better. If the captain has to know, okay -- but, you tell him."

"What about Spock? Does he know?"

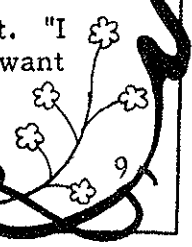
"No, and he's not going to." Cassie stated matter-of-factly.

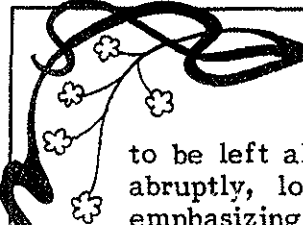
"Why not? He's probably the closest friend you have on board this ship. I've seen the way you two work together. There's something special about your relationship."

Cassie agreed. "Yes, it is special. We're good friends -- colleagues." She paused. "But that's it; we're just good friends."

"Then you owe him an explanation." McCoy insisted.

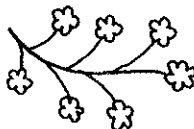
"Vulcan or not, I can't lay this sort of thing on him." Cassie was adamant. "I don't want anyone's sympathy, and I sure as hell don't want patronization. I just want





to be left alone to live out what few remaining days I have in peace." She stopped abruptly, lowering her head. "I'm only 33 years old." Her shoulders heaved, emphasizing her frustration, as she began to cry in front of him. "By God, if I have to die, I'm going to do it my way -- with dignity."

McCoy moved around the desk and took her in his arms to try to comfort her anguish. He stroked her long, brown hair tenderly. He wanted to say the right thing -- somehow make the truth of the monstrous nightmare go away, but he knew he could not. There were still things doctors were not able to fix, and Webber's Syndrome was one of them. As McCoy held Cassie in his arms, he thought, It's times like this that make me feel so damn insignificant!



His ego bruised temporarily, James Kirk retreated to the privacy of his own quarters. Maybe he could make points with Dr. Patterson some other way. In the meantime, he poured himself a nightcap and settled down on the couch with his treasured, hard bound copy of **The Three Musketeers**. The door sensor chimed, indicating a visitor. The captain lay the book aside. "Come."

His Chief Medical Officer entered the room. Kirk rose from the couch. "What brings you to my door this time of night?" he asked smugly. "Surely Dr. Patterson didn't change her mind and kick you out?"

McCoy ignored Kirk's sarcastic remarks and headed straight for the bar. He poured himself a double and swallowed it in one long gulp. He was about to pour another when Kirk grabbed the bottle out of his hand. "Go easy on this stuff, Bones."

"We've got a problem, Jim," McCoy said somberly.

"Problem? What kind of problem?"

"Dr. Patterson." McCoy took the bottle from Kirk and completed pouring a second round.

"Bones, you're talking in circles. What's gotten you so frazzled?" Kirk was becoming concerned about his friend.

"Dammit, Jim, didn't Starfleet tell you the reason why Dr. Patterson decided to retire at such a young age?"

"I'd assumed that she was burned out after spending three long years out in the middle of nowhere."

McCoy slammed the glass down on the bar top, the amber liquor splashing over the sides. "She's burned out, all right. Burned out from dedicating every spare minute of her time trying to find a cure to her own illness."

"Bones, you're not making any sense." The captain tried to calm the doctor. "Start at the beginning."

"Dr. Patterson and I have just finished a long talk in her quarters. Eight months after her arrival at Almatheas Seven, she was diagnosed as suffering from Webber's Syndrome."

"Isn't that the disease she was telling us about earlier?"

"One in the same. She's spent the last two years trying to develop a cure, or at least a decent therapy, that might stagger the effects and give her more time to do research."

"Dr. Patterson also said it was fatal" Kirk stated grimly.

"It is."

"My God, Bones. How long"

"As close as she can predict according to the onset of the first symptoms, Dr. Patterson estimates a couple of weeks at the most. Who knows for sure." McCoy sighed. "If this were a textbook example, we might be able to depend on that prognosis."

Kirk was confused. "What do you mean?"

"I've never seen a case involving Webber's yet that conforms to the textbook schedule of events. Dr. Patterson's symptoms are progressing faster than they should be," McCoy explained.

"Does Spock know?"

"She refuses to tell him. She didn't want you to know, but I persuaded her to let me tell you in case something should happen en route to Starbase Twelve." The doctor hesitated. "I didn't exactly enjoy the idea of the possibility of her death coming as a surprise."

"Christ!" Kirk blurted out as he fell onto the couch. He turned his head toward McCoy. "Bones, shouldn't she be under medical observation -- or something -- in the meantime?"

"Until the last stage, she'll be all right. Except for the weakness she's experiencing, no one would ever guess anything's wrong."

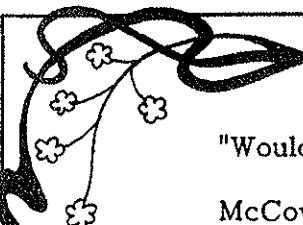
"Isn't there anything we can do?" Kirk's tone was pleading.

"She has everything planned out. She insists on doing this her way." McCoy answered.

The captain was hesitant to ask his next question. "Theoretically, Bones, do you think there's a chance she might try something desperate?"

"I've seen Webber's in its final stages, Jim." McCoy answered. "It's far from being painless, even with the use of narcotics," he added reluctantly."



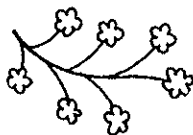


"Would she have the means to carry out such a plan?"

McCoy sat down beside Kirk. "I have no idea what Cassie brought with her as far as medications go. She could have the means right this very minute. If not, there are always other effective methods. But I don't think we have to worry about the possibility while she's on the ship. My guess is that she told me because she had to get it off her chest and she couldn't bring herself to tell the one person whom she trusted the most as a friend."

"Spock?"

"Spock." The two friends sat in silence.



By 1100 hours the next day, the *Enterprise* had reached its destination and established orbit. The crew beamed down in alternating shifts for a little R&R before departure at 1500.

In the transporter room, Spock was saying good-bye to Cassie when Kirk appeared unannounced. "Don't say your good-byes just yet, Spock," Kirk said diplomatically.

"Captain?"

"Aren't you beaming down with Dr. Patterson?" Kirk asked.

"I had not intended to do so," Spock replied.

Cassie eyed Kirk suspiciously. It was obvious McCoy had told him about her condition, and this maneuver was a ploy to get her and Spock together -- alone. "Perhaps Mr. Spock has some more important tasks to attend to, Captain," she suggested.

"Work can wait until later. Besides, I've never known Spock to turn down the chance to attend a chess tournament."

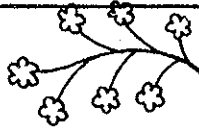
"Chess?" Cassie asked, her own interest aroused.

"You did know the Fleet-wide finals are taking place here, didn't you?" Kirk asked as enticement. "We can get along without him for a couple of hours. Now go."

"Captain . . . Jim . . ." Spock started to protest.

"That's an order!" The captain about-faced and left the room as suddenly as he had appeared.

"I will never understand the human mind," Spock commented as he ushered Cassie onto the platform, then took his own place. "Energize, Mr. Scott."



After observing a few well-played matches of chess, Spock and Cassie moved out to the rose garden. Cassie bent down to smell the flowers. "Ummm, this place is intoxicating. Your mother would love it here."

"I am certain she would indeed find the garden most stimulating." Spock stood near the reflecting pool, his mood more solemn than usual. In a matter of hours, their paths would once again diverge. He could not comprehend why the thought suddenly disturbed him. They had parted company before in the past. Why was now any different?

"A penny for your thoughts?"

Spock snapped out of his daydream. "Were you speaking to me, Cassie?"

"Daydreaming, Spock? Tsk, tsk, that's a human trait." She teased. "Maybe you've been around the captain and Dr. McCoy so much that they're rubbing off on you."

"Rubbing off on me?" he asked, arching an eyebrow.

Cassie laughed. "It's a human expression meaning that after you've been around someone for a certain length of time, you begin picking up, or assuming some of their traits."

"Such as?"

"Emotions -- friendship."

"Captain Kirk and Dr. McCoy are my fellow officers."

"They're your friends. You ought to see the way your face lights up whenever you talk about them." Cassie's voice took on a serious tone. "And there will no doubt come a time in your life when you will need the support of a friend or two. Accept what they have to offer graciously, for it will be those same friends who will stand by you through thick and thin." Taking a step, Cassie tottered off balance and almost fell.

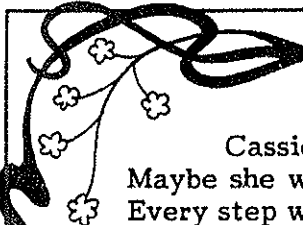
Instinctively, Spock reached out and caught her. "Are you all right?"

"You know me, two left feet." Cassie avoided the Vulcan's questioning gaze by pulling free of his hold. The last thing she needed was for him to detect the presence of the fever.

God, if only I can get through the next few hours. Cassie thought. It will be so much easier -- Spock will be gone.

But, Cassie knew the imbalance was merely a warning that she was rapidly passing into the last hours of the disease. Pain once again racked her body with each beat of her heart. The pain medication administered just before leaving the *Enterprise* had not even phased the excruciating spasms.





Cassie walked away from Spock toward a nearby bench. She had to sit down. Maybe she would be able to get through the next few hours if she could just sit down. Every step was to be a challenge of her will.

Unable to continue, she sank to the ground like a rag doll. "Spock . . . "

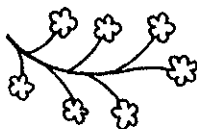
Spock rushed to her side to find her barely breathing and burning up with fever. He looked up to a passerby. "Contact sickbay. This woman needs immediate medical attention."

"Right away, sir."

"Please, don't leave me . . . " Cassie begged.

"I'll stay with you until help arrives, I promise." Spock assured her.

"I'm sorry . . . " she gasped, as she slipped into unconsciousness.



Back on board the **Enterprise**, Uhura turned to where Kirk and McCoy were talking. "Captain?"

"Yes, Uhura?"

"I'm receiving a message from Starbase Twelve's medical unit. They say that Dr. Patterson has collapsed. Dr. McBride is requesting Dr. McCoy's presence at once."

Kirk glanced to McCoy with a worried look in his eyes. "Spock is down there with her."

"Damn," McCoy grumbled. "Uhura, tell Central I'm on my way."

"Aye, sir."

"Jim, I'd like you to be there if I have to tell Spock." The doctor requested.

"No problem." Kirk hit a button on the panel. "Kirk to engineering."

"Engineering. Scott here."

"There's been an emergency at Starbase Twelve. Dr. McCoy and I are beaming down immediately. You have the conn, Mr. Scott."

"Aye, sir."

"Kirk out." Kirk rushed toward the lift. "Let's go!"



Arriving at the main medical complex, the pair were met by Spock's grim expression. McCoy instantly knew what was wrong, but asked, "What happened, Spock?"

"Dr. Patterson collapsed outside in the garden." Spock reported efficiently. "She's refused to any and all treatment until she's had the chance to speak with you, Doctor."

"Probably can't get enough of my bedside manner," McCoy said with a forced smile.

Entering the ICU, McCoy met with Dr. Tyrone McBride, CMO at Starbase Twelve. "How is she doing?"

"Not good at all. We've been ready to handle her case since Starfleet notified us that she was en route. But I'm afraid the disease has progressed much faster than anyone, including Dr. Patterson, had suspected. She's too far gone for us to be able to help her."

"May I see her?"

"She's been asking for you, but try to keep it short, okay?"

"Sure." McCoy crossed the floor to Cassie's bed. He took her hand in his. "Hey, how ya doing?"

"Not good. Dr. McCoy, I want you to promise me something."

"Anything, Cassie."

"Promise me that you and the captain will make sure Spock returns to the ship with you. I don't want him here when the end comes." Cassie closed her eyes. Just talking seemed to expend every ounce of energy she possessed, then added. "The base legal office has everything they'll need for the final arrangements."

"Cassie, you have to tell Spock what's going on. He was with you when you collapsed. There's no doubt that he is getting suspicious."

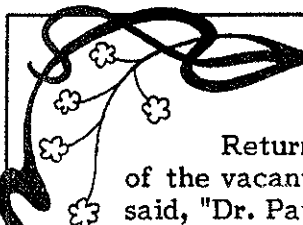
"Suspicion is a human characteristic, Doctor." Cassie forced a smile, "Remember?"

"He is half human, remember?" McCoy squeezed her hand. "You are a strong woman, and I know you'll do the right thing and tell Spock as soon as possible."

"It won't be easy." Cassie had already resolved herself to the fact she would have to tell him.

"I know, but you have to . . . as a friend." McCoy kissed her forehead. "I'd better go before McBride chases me out of here."





Returning to the outer waiting area, McCoy brushed past Kirk and fell into one of the vacant chairs, burying his face in his hands. Not able to look at the Vulcan, he said, "Dr. Patterson's ready to see you now, Spock."

No words were necessary. The expression on McCoy's face told James Kirk that the time they had been dreading was here.

Spock approached the bed where Cassie lay. She was looking pale and very fragile. "Cassie?"

"I've deceived you, my dear friend. I must explain and apologize while there is still time."

"You should rest and preserve your strength."

"It's important that I tell you the truth. I didn't ask for a transfer off Almatheas Seven. I was proven medically unfit by Federation authorities there." Cassie's voice was harsh and raspy. "I suffer from an illness called Webber's Syndrome."

With her words came a familiar stirring deep within his soul. Something more powerful than he ever dared to admit. It was fear — fear like he had experienced when he thought he had killed his captain and friend on Vulcan. Fear of being unable to recover the same friend from the space interphase near Tholia. The dull, aching sensation reminded him of the fear felt when discovering McCoy was terminally ill and he was unable to help. Despite all the Vulcan training — his strict discipline, a similar fear now haunted him as he stood next to another dying friend.

"You have carried this burden all alone." Spock observed. "There were many people you could have spoken to — the captain, Dr. McCoy," and after a brief pause, he added, "even myself."

"I had my reasons for not telling you, Spock. Please don't hold it against me."

"To hold your motives against you would be most absurd. Is there anything I may do for you in what time you have left?"

"Yes, Spock. Return to the ship with the others. And do not dwell upon my death. Remember all the good times we've shared working together as a team on board the *Enterprise*." Cassie struggled against the narcotics' effects.

"I'll let you rest, now. I have known few such as you, Cassandra Patterson. May you find the eternal peace you deserve." As Cassie fell under the influence of the drugs, Spock straightened and left the unit, unable to verbalize a good-bye. Composing himself, he trudged out to the waiting area where he was met by Kirk and McCoy.

"Is everything okay?" McCoy asked with caution.

"Yes, Doctor. Everything is quite all right."

McCoy wrung his hands together. "Listen, Spock, I know I tend to harass you a lot, but if there is anything I can do . . ."

"I will be fine, Doctor." Spock cut off McCoy in midsentence. After a moment of silence, he added, "Thank you for your offer, nonetheless."

Kirk interceded. "Gentlemen, it's time we were returning to the ship."

"I believe we have approximately fifty-one point two-three minutes until the **Enterprise** is scheduled for departure." Spock led the way back to the main transporter center. Sometimes, his human half could prove to be an inconvenience -- a nuisance. But Cassie had been right about one thing in her observation. Kirk and McCoy were perhaps the two best friends any one person could ever hope to possess.

Kirk and McCoy followed Spock closely. They both knew that Spock would deal with Cassie's death in his own way, in his own time. For now, all they could do would be to offer their understanding and support. They knew that beneath that sturdy, untarnished exterior of logic, lay a heart as human as their's.





FRIENDS

"Your associates are people of good character."
"They are my friends."

I look at you standing in front of me,
My only son,
The one person who has never been afraid
To stand against me.
Your statement is quiet,
Yet defiant.
Friends. . . .
A word not heard much on Vulcan,
Yet there is honesty in your voice.
But it is not the whole truth.
One is more than a friend,
But you will never speak of it --
Nor will he.
You both made a great sacrifice --
You gave your life for him,
And he opened his mind,
That most inviolate of possessions --
On demand --
To me,
Hiding nothing.
Now I stand here shaken --
Yet warmed,
For what I saw in his mind
I see reflected in your eyes.
I am happy for you, my son,
For what you have found.
There is so much I could say
But find myself only able to nod
And whisper,
"Yes, of course."

Cries of the Children

By: Debbie Cummins

Art by: Christine Myers

The sun was warm and the breeze cut through the valley with the softness of velvet. Spock's hair blew away from his forehead and resettled in an asymmetrical pattern against his face. He took a deep breath, inhaling the fragrance of the flowers that grew in profusion at his feet. If he noticed the disordered bangs, he gave them no attention.

"Lovely, isn't it?"

He turned to see James Kirk move to stand at his side, his furrowed brow eased by the beauty of the surroundings. Spock nodded his head. "It is indeed, Captain." The Vulcan watched Kirk as he enjoyed the verdant landscape. For the first time in weeks, the captain seemed completely relaxed. Kirk threw his head back, filling his lungs with the succulent air. He closed his eyes, allowing Spock the luxury of watching him directly.

Kirk was tired. The mission the *Enterprise* had just completed had been exhausting for all, but especially so for him. A large part of it involved his working alone on an undercover assignment, negotiating Federation treaties with a motley collection of corrupt, suspicious government officials on a planet unremarkable in every way but one. It's mantle was encrusted with dilithium deposits -- a galactic treasure trove open to the highest bidder.

Kirk had laughingly described the mission to a somber faced Spock as cloak and dagger, but the lighthearted banter did not disguise the dangers. The political climate on the tiny planet was tense and the government wanted knowledge of Federation involvement kept from the unpredictable populace. There were factions among the lower classes that would have used the presence of the Federation to stir up the masses. Starfleet did not approve of the governmental system, but, constrained by the Prime Directive, was powerless to alter it. If they wanted the treaty and the dilithium, they had to concede to the government's demands of anonymity.

So Kirk had gone down alone, carrying out the negotiations without a hitch and earning himself another Starfleet citation in the bargain. He had beamed up to the ship, nonchalant about his success. Nevertheless, the assignment had been arduous. Despite his easy manner, the captain was exhausted and Spock knew it. He could almost see the hard muscles unwind; could sense the fatigue melt away in the warmth

of the sunshine. This assignment, coming on the heels of the last one, was exactly what the captain needed. An easy mission to investigate an apparently hospitable world for possible colonization.

Kirk opened his eyes. Spock glanced away, pretending to study the horizon. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the faint smile that touched Kirk's lips. He sighed. Around his friend, he was as transparent as glass.

The smile broadened as Kirk turned to face him. "I'm all right, Spock. Just a little tired." He lay a hand gently on the Vulcan's arm. "You worry too much. You should learn to relax." The captain laughed at his friend's expression.

Spock looked away, running his tricorder across the hillside before him. "This planet would seem to be a prime candidate for colonization."

Kirk watched him for a moment before turning to examine the landscape. He took another deep breath. "The air smells like perfume. There must be a hundred different flowering species within a mile radius." He put his hands on his hips, stretching his back. "A lovely planet indeed. This assignment will be a pleasure. Too bad we can't drag it out a little." He looked around, his eyes taking in the other members of the landing party scattered across the valley. The *Enterprise* crewmembers were efficient. Their work would be done within an hour. His expression grew wistful.

Watching him, Spock almost wished that something would happen, something to delay them and allow the captain a little more time in this peaceful valley.

Kirk shook himself out of his reverie. Slapping his open palms against his ribcage, he turned to Spock. "Enough daydreaming. Shall we get to work?" He pointed to the river. "You go down and run those water tests for McCoy. I'll scout up the floodplain and take soil samples." He raised his hand to shield his eyes from the bright sunshine. "The science team is already a quarter of a mile ahead of me. They'll be finished gathering those sedimentary samples before I even begin. I'd better hurry." He flashed Spock a smile before taking off up the valley at a run.

Spock watched him go, shaking his head. Why must he always run? Why must he always be so driven? To walk would only take a few moments longer. Spock sighed, knowing that the captain would always be so driven.

Slowly, he turned and headed toward the river.



James Kirk finished gathering his soil samples and looked up to see Lieutenant Peterson of Life Sciences approaching him from the hillside. He rose to his feet, securing the last tiny vial in the protective case slung over his shoulder. Other members of the landing party assembled behind them. Kirk looked around. "Where's Olivet?"

"He went around the far side to collect one last sample, Sir. He'll meet us at the river."

Kirk nodded, turning toward the wide expanse of water five hundred yards away. His eyes searched for the familiar outline along the riverbank but Spock was nowhere to be seen. Kirk frowned. He had looked only ten minutes before to see the Vulcan bending over, examining the flora along the bank. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the square form of Lieutenant Olivet emerge from the opposite side of the hill and move toward the river. "Olivet!"

The Lieutenant turned around. "Yes, Captain?"

"Do you see Mr. Spock?"

Olivet turned to face the river as he rapidly scanned the sloping banks. "Negative, Sir. I don't see him."

Kirk felt a knot tighten in his stomach. His famous captain's intuition was sending him a warning signal loud and clear. "Come on." He moved out ahead of the others. As he drew closer to the water, his pace increased. He was running by the time he reached the river.

Sensing his worry, Olivet ran toward him. "Captain, what . . . ?"

"Where's Spock?" Kirk looked around, a cold sense of foreboding hitting him with the force of a physical blow.

Olivet turned toward the others who raced up to join the two men. "I don't know, Sir."

Kirk called out the Vulcan's name. There was no response. He pulled out his communicator and opened a channel. The device in his hand remained silent.

The last time I saw him, he was standing right here, Kirk thought, his gaze on the sheer drop five feet away. The bank, undercut here by the river, plunged over twenty feet to the water below. It was the most logical possibility. "Peterson, Selkin," he barked. "Go south along the riverbank. Olivet and Tormin, go north." As the men moved away from him, he called up to the ship.

"Scott here."

"Scotty, Spock is missing. I want a surface scan of the river. And make it fast."

"Aye, Sir."

Kirk heard the Scotsman call out the orders as the bridge crew efficiently carried out his command. He returned his gaze to the murky water two dozen feet below him. If Spock had slipped and fallen from the edge, the impact could well have knocked him unconscious. Kirk's heart began to pound.

"Captain?" Scott's voice had an edge to it and Kirk knew before he spoke what the engineer's report would be. "Captain, I'm not gettin' any reading on him, Sir. I'll recalibrate the scanners for maximum penetration of the water, but they still won't pick up anything more than forty-two feet beneath the surface. And it'll take longer."

"Go, Mr. Scott. Signal with your report." Kirk closed the channel and, aiming his tricorder at the water, scanned the area directly in front of him. The river was deep. Except for the areas flanking the shoreline, it averaged sixty-eight feet in depth. The tricorder, unlike the more sensitive ship scanners, was unable to penetrate beyond twenty-one feet. He concentrated his search efforts near the shore, praying silently that Scott would find Spock with the scanners. Otherwise, manual probes would take hours.

Scott's voice came back to him a few moments later. "Nothing, sir."

Kirk froze for an instant. "Very well, Mr. Scott. Get an investigative team down here with the skimmers and probes. Inform Doctor McCoy and tell him to beam down with a medical team. We'll continue to search from here." He paused. When he spoke again, his voice was very low. "And run checks on the surface, look for any geographical irregularities that may not be visible from down here, anything out of the ordinary." His voice dropped an octave lower. "And check space for any evidence of transferral beams or radiation left by a ship's engines."

"Aye, Sir."

Kirk flipped the communicator closed. His adrenaline was pumping through his system so rapidly that he felt light-headed. He took three huge breaths to clear his thoughts. Then, pointing his tricorder at the river, he continued to search.



The small vessel skimmed along the surface of the river, probing the depths as it moved back and forth from one bank to another. Starfleet personnel were everywhere, running countless tricorder checks, searching the surroundings a dozen times over. They had been scouring the area for over an hour to no avail. Ship's scanners had revealed nothing. No evidence of anything unusual on the planet's surface, no sign of any disruptions in the space surrounding it. Nothing.

The captain of the *Enterprise* stood in the center of a knot of people. A series of reports were given to him, concise, unemotional, rendered in a detached, professional manner. Kirk listened, his face impassive, his manner businesslike. As if on cue, the reports were terminated and the personnel dispersed to continue their work. Kirk brought out his communicator. "Mr. Scott, report on those additional electromagnetic scans."

"We've calibrated for the full spectrum and run it through again, Sir. There's been no distortion of fields, no excess energy directed to within a hundred parsecs of the planet. No sign whatsoever of a transferral beam."

Kirk's knuckles grew white against the communicator. "What are the chances that it was a beam our scanners couldn't register?"

"If it were totally alien, I suppose it's possible that our scanners wouldn't pick it up." Scott paused for a moment in thought. "But I don't think that happened, Captain. After the Triskelion incident, Mr. Spock and I made some alterations on the sensor scans. A transporter beam, no matter how alien, would create a distortion in the

surrounding space. That was how Mr. Spock found you that time, Captain, and he modified the program to highlight the distortions. He was bound and determined not to have that happen again. And you know how Mr. Spock can be when he gets his mind made up. . . . " Scott's voice trailed off. He cleared his throat when the captain made no comment. "No, Sir. He wasn't beamed away by a transporter beam. I'd stake my reputation on it."

Kirk pressed his lips together. Scott's words simply reinforced what he already understood. He knew Spock well enough to know that the Vulcan would not have concluded his endeavors until he was satisfied.

So it wasn't a transferral beam. There was no residual radiation from a ship's engines. They had run tests for every type of powering drive known in Federation records. Nothing. Spock wasn't on the surface and there was no evidence whatsoever that he had been removed from the planet. It was as if the earth had simply opened up and swallowed him.

"Very well, Mr. Scott. Continue scanning. Let me know if you turn up anything. Kirk out." He looked up to see McCoy detach himself from a group of medical personnel and walk rapidly to his side. The doctor merely shook his head.

"Captain!" One of the men on the water skimmer called out. "We've found something, Sir!"

Kirk felt his blood turn cold. He ran to the water's edge, McCoy at his heels, and stopped, watching in silence as the men repositioned the probe and pushed it down into the water directly below them. The rest of the team gathered around the captain. No one made a sound.

The men on the skimmer leaned forward, studying the probe. The splashing it made as it was moved around in the water sounded loud in the silence. One of the men looked up. Even from thirty feet away, Kirk could see the paleness of his face. "We're getting a warmblooded reading, Sir. Sixty-four kilograms in weight. No respiration."

Kirk's heart skipped a beat. Beside him, he could hear McCoy speak softly. "The water's cold enough, Jim. Even after an hour, it may not be too late."

Kirk did not look away from the skimmer at the doctor's words. He was unconsciously holding his breath.

After an endless moment, one of the men straightened up. "It's an animal, Sir. An ungulate of some form."

Kirk let the air out of his lungs in a sound resembling a gasp. McCoy visibly sagged. "Thank god," the doctor whispered under his breath.



The search continued until the sun set. Kirk efficiently organized the efforts, but McCoy could see the tenseness growing in him as the hours passed.

"Jim." He lay a hand on the captain's shoulder, momentarily stilling the restless activity. "You've been down here for nearly seven hours now. Come up to the ship with me and take a rest." Kirk stared at him, but said nothing.

McCoy persisted. "Jim, they'll call you if they learn anything." McCoy studied Kirk's face, watching the muscles in his jaw stiffen. The doctor's grip on his shoulder tightened. "You won't do Spock or anyone else any good if you collapse. Come up to the ship with me and get some rest . . . please."

"How could he simply disappear, Bones?" Kirk's eyes focused on something far away. For an instant, McCoy wondered if the captain had heard anything he had just said. "He has to be somewhere. I saw him standing right here." He looked down at the ground at his feet, "not ten minutes before he disappeared." Kirk rubbed his left thumb against the palm of his right hand, an unconscious gesture of tension that McCoy recognized immediately. "God damn it, Bones," he whispered, "where is he?" There was a faint, but very clear tremor in the captain's voice.

McCoy felt his stomach tighten. Every doctor's instinct propelled him to attempt to offer consolation, but, looking into Kirk's distraught eyes, he knew that there was nothing he could say. After so many fruitless hours, a feeling of futility was beginning to pervade the entire landing party. McCoy was not immune to it. Nor was the captain.

The doctor pulled out his communicator and handed it to Kirk. "Please Jim. Come back to the ship with me . . . for just a few hours."

Kirk stared at the communicator in McCoy's hand. Slowly, he reached out and took it in his own. In a voice barely audible, he signaled the ship.



By the end of the third day, the mood on board was somber. People spoke in hushed tones, especially around the captain. Kirk, bleary eyed from anxiety and lack of sleep, had spent the last several hours on the planet and now sat at Spock's computer console, programming in another scanning pattern, tensely waiting for the result.

Uhura cast him an oblique look. Kirk's eyes were glassy, his hands clenched. Sulu turned to catch Uhura's gaze. He shook his head, his expression filled with sorrow. Chekov stared at his monitors.

Kirk slid a computer disk into the slot and waited for the computer's report. He flicked the switch. The harsh metallic voice came back to him an instant later. "Results of scan negative."

Kirk slammed his fist down against the panel. Everyone on the bridge jumped. The captain closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Then he rose to his feet and walked into the turbolift. "I'll be in sickbay, Lieutenant."

Uhura turned to see him stand with his back to the bridge, rigid as reinforced steel. An instant later the doors shut, taking him down to McCoy.

◆◆◆◆◆

The message from Starfleet Command came just as Kirk crossed through the sickbay doors. He went to McCoy's desk and opened the channel. Admiral Fitzpatrick's grim face flashed instantly before him. "Captain, we have your report of the events of the past three days. Have there been any recent developments?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Kirk saw McCoy gesture toward the chair behind him. He sat down. "No, Admiral. Commander Spock is still missing."

"Captain . . . " The lines around the Admiral's face deepened. It was obvious that he did not like what he was about to say. "Captain, this disappearance could have very serious repercussions if Commander Spock has fallen into the hands of an enemy of the Federation. If you believe that such a scenario is possible, I must know now in order to alter certain highly sensitive codes and procedures that Commander Spock was privy to."

McCoy planted himself behind Kirk's chair, coming into Fitzpatrick's view for the first time. His eyes were dark with anger. "Spock would not betray his Starfleet oath, Admiral. He'd die first."

Fitzpatrick looked over Kirk's shoulder to study McCoy's face. "He may not have that option, Doctor." His voice was very low. "I'm sorry, gentlemen, but we have to prepare for the contingency that Commander Spock could divulge sensitive information. . . . "

Kirk rose to his feet. Seeing the captain's expression, Fitzpatrick hesitated. "Admiral." Kirk's words were spoken clearly and precisely. "We have run multiple tests on the atmosphere and surrounding space and have found no evidence that a vessel or transporter beam has been within a hundred parsecs of the planet."

"We've received intelligence reports for the past several months that the Klingons have been working on a method of total screening. If they have successfully accomplished it, the engine's radiation trail would not be visible."

"Spock would not betray his oath."

"Captain," Noting Kirk's haggard appearance, Fitzpatrick's gaze softened. "Jim, I'm not questioning his courage or integrity. But I can't ignore these reports. It won't be the first time we've changed the codes, you know that. When Captain Shaughnessy vanished eighteen months ago in the Altair sector we altered the pattern."

"Spock's only been missing for three days. Don't you think you're writing him off a bit too early?" McCoy spoke the words harshly as his face began to flush.

Fitzpatrick did not respond. His gaze remained on Kirk, who stood silently before him. After a moment, he nodded. "Very well, Captain. Our intelligence status will remain unchanged for now. Inform me immediately if you learn anything. Fitzpatrick out."

The viewscreen went dark. Kirk turned off the monitor. His face was pale. The Admiral's words had only served to reinforce the fears that were lurking at the back of his own mind. He knew of the Klingon rumors, just as the Admiral did.

"That son-of-a-bitch."

McCoy's harsh words startled him and he turned around. Kirk regarded the doctor sadly. "By rights Admiral Fitzpatrick should have changed the codes already, Bones, and you know it." He leaned forward, resting his head in his hands. "I've seen those intelligence reports too." His shoulders began to sag.

"Jim, go to your quarters and lie down. Please."

Kirk stared at the tabletop. "This not knowing is the worst, Bones. What if Fitzpatrick is right? What if the Klingons did manage to get him out of here without leaving a trail?" Kirk closed his eyes. "Dear God, Bones. What if the Klingons have him?"

McCoy lay a compassionate hand on Kirk's shoulder. The muscles were rock-hard beneath the tunic. "Jim," he said gently, "if the Klingons had been able to do that, don't you think that they'd have gone after you instead of Spock?"

Kirk looked up at him, hope evident in his eyes for an instant. Then his gaze darkened once again. "I wasn't isolated like Spock. I was always with someone else. Besides, how would they have been able to pick my readings out from those of the other humans? Spock was the only Vulcan and, therefore, he would have been easy to isolate."

A look of sadness came into the Kirk's eyes. "He was always the different one, Bones. Humans and human-looking people seem to be everywhere, but Vulcans are so rare." He shook his head. "I often found myself wishing that, when we beamed down to a planet with a humanoid population, they would be Vulcan in appearance." The words trailed off. "But they never were."

Kirk's emotional control was beginning to fragment. Rising to his feet, he pushed the chair back with such force that it hit the floor with a loud thud. Neither of the two men paid it any attention. "I'm going to my quarters, Doctor." His jaw tight, Kirk moved quickly toward the door, determined to maintain the facade until he reached the privacy of his own rooms.

At that moment, Chekov paged him over the intercom. The Russian's speech was so rapid, the tone so excited that it heightened his accent, making the words difficult to understand.

Reacting to his excitement, the captain ran to the intercom and slammed his hand against the switch. "Kirk here. What . . ."

"Captain! I've picked up Mr. Spock's body readings, Sir! Right on the riverbank where you last saw him! He just appeared there out of nowhere!"

Kirk's heart seemed to stop. "Get him up, Chekov! Feed the coordinates to the transporter room! I'm on my way." He ran to the door without waiting to close the

channel. "Get your medical kit and meet me there, McCoy!" He yelled the words over his shoulder as he disappeared down the corridor.



It was the sunlight reflecting off the smooth surface that attracted the Vulcan's attention. Glancing up from his tricorder, he saw the spark of color and, bending down, picked up the small rock lying nestled in the grass at his feet. Silver and red swirled around one another in a striking combination, indications of its fiery rebirth in a volcano millions of years before.

Turning the stone in his hand, Spock twitched instinctively as a sliver of quartz sliced into one index finger. Opening his hand, he examined the wound. The cut was smooth and shallow and he quickly dismissed the injury as irrelevant.

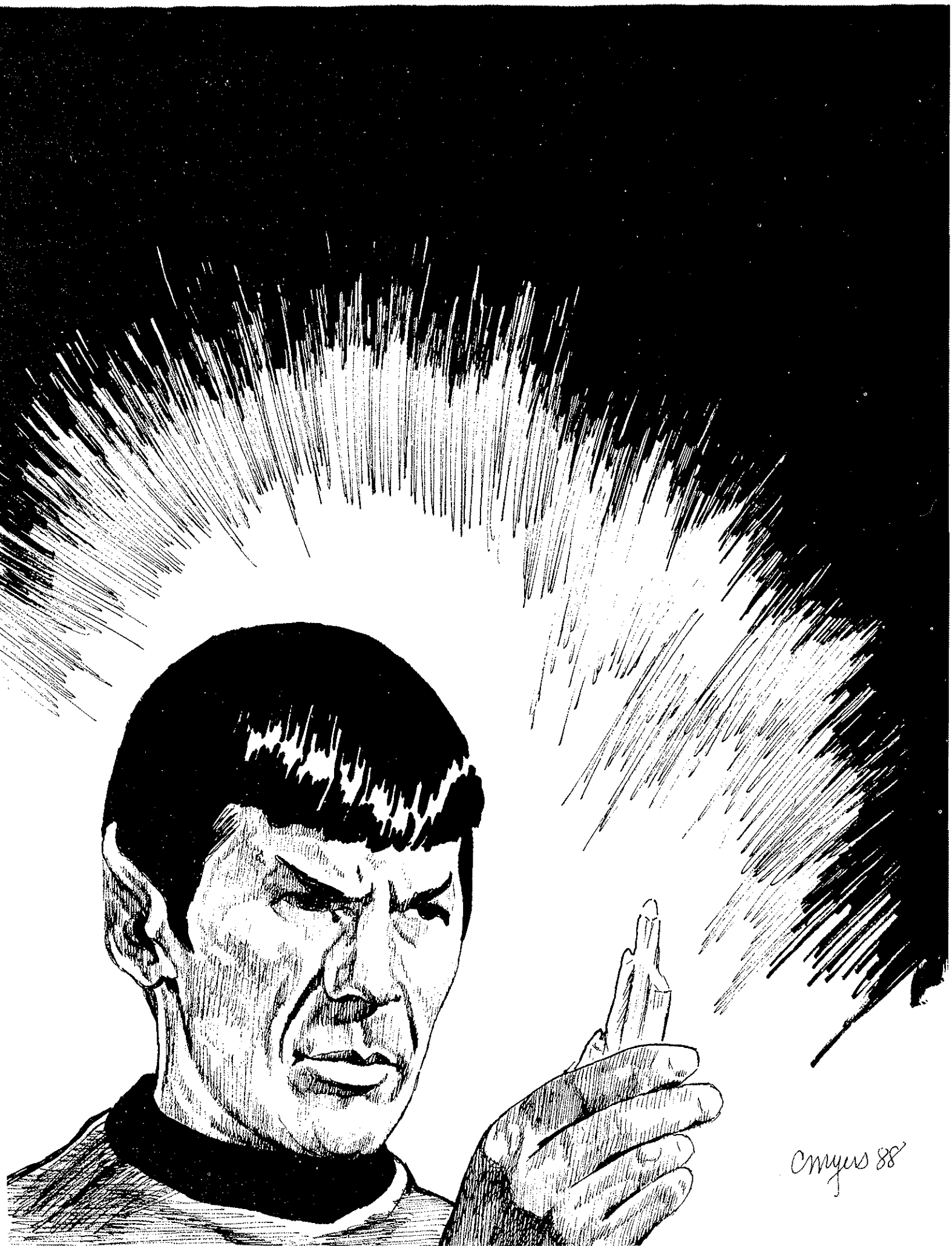
Taking another step forward, Spock suddenly felt every hair on his body begin to rise as if he had just walked through a faint electrical charge. Looking up, he saw that the river was no longer there. The blue sky overhead was now tinted a gentle shade of lavender, the air hot and sultry. Instinctively, he took a step backward, allowing the rock to slip through his fingers as he moved. The tingling sensation reoccurred, accompanied by a brief flash of disorientation. A half-second later, the river reappeared, shimmering like a mirage before crystallizing into its familiar pattern. Before Spock could organize his thoughts, he was gripped by the sensation of the transporter beam. The entire incident lasted only three seconds.

Moments later, First Officer Spock appeared on the platform. The first thing he saw was Transporter Chief Kyle standing ten feet before him, his jaw hanging. The door opened and Kirk ran in, his eyes enormous, his face pale. Spock watched in confusion as the captain stopped abruptly at the base of the platform with uncharacteristic hesitancy. He stared up, as if doubting the evidence of his own senses. "Spock . . . ?"

The Vulcan moved forward, confused by Kirk's reaction, by his even being on the ship. An instant ago he had glanced up to see the captain kneeling on the hillside below, flanked by two of his crew. Spock studied his face, noting the exhaustion, the disheveled look. He even seemed thinner, as if he had not eaten in days. Spock felt a surge of that illogical, familiar fear that was now so much a part of himself. He took another step forward. "Captain, what has happened? Are you all right?"

At the sound of Spock's voice, Kirk let out the breath he had been holding in. His face turned a shade whiter and, for an instant, Spock was certain that he was about to faint. His own fear increased geometrically. "Captain . . . what . . . "

At that moment, Leonard McCoy raced into the room, mediscanner immediately running. The doctor brushed past Kirk and slid to a stop directly before him. Without a word, McCoy ran the scanner rapidly along the length of his body, studying it intensively, carrying out a half dozen tests at once. Two medics pushed a gurney into the room.



cmgus 88

Spock's eyes widened. "Doctor, I assure you . . . "

"Shut up, Spock, and get on the gurney."

Hearing McCoy call him by name, Kirk moved forward. "Let him walk, Bones."

McCoy flashed him a look, but the captain's gaze was not on him. It was on Spock. A look of wonderment spread across his face. For the first time in three days, he smiled. Slowly, he climbed the transporter steps and stood before his First Officer. He straightened his back and, when he spoke, his voice was level and calm, the emotional turmoil brought once again under control. "Mr. Spock," he said softly, "where have you been?"



The child ran from behind the tall grass the instant the strange creature disappeared. Holding her hand out before her, she swept the air where the apparition had been. But the air was still. Her heart hammered wildly within her chest as her mind replayed the startling vision. It stood here, she thought, scanning the grass at her feet. It came from nowhere, from the very air itself, and stood right here. The creature did not look like her people. Its skin was smooth, its body tall and thin, its hands hardly hands at all, with no claws at the fingertips. More like a visitor from hell than from heaven.

But still, it appeared in the exact way that had been described by the holy men from the city -- the men in stiff robes who visited her village once a year, armed with heavy books and long sermons. They would come and, among other things, tell tales of heavenly messengers who materialized from nothingness to walk among the people for a time. And, although those miracles had occurred in days long past, the stories always filled her with a sense of awe. Despite his strange appearance, this creature had come in such a way. And could not a visitor from heaven take on any form he desired?

It had to be an angel, she reasoned, her terror of a few minutes ago dissipated now as the thought settled into a certainty spawned of childlike innocence and a firm, albeit unquestioning, religious faith. And a primitive culture woefully ill-equipped to handle the devastation she was unknowingly about to bring into it.

"I've got to find something," she said aloud, her voice high-pitched with excitement. "Something that he left behind, to bring home to my parents - to show them. There must be . . . " The words faded away as she noticed the rock that the angel had carried with him from the other side. She picked it up and studied the peculiar color staining one side. Stretching out a finger, she lightly brushed the emerald fluid against her own skin. A relic, she thought. A sacred relic. The blood of an angel.

Wrapping the priceless object in one tiny fist, the child took off toward her village at a run.

Spock lay on the diagnostic bed, uncomfortable as usual under McCoy's intense scrutiny. But the doctor was not watching him now. His concentration was centered on the panels above Spock's head, searching the dials as they settled into a normal Vulcan pattern.

Spock turned toward the outer doorway as Kirk entered the room and walked over to stand at his side. The captain smiled. "Admiral Fitzpatrick sends his regards, Commander."

Spock nodded, his attention on Kirk's face. Despite the smile, the ravages of the past three days were clearly written there. He had seen the captain's exhaustion, felt his emotional distress the instant he had materialized on the transporter pad, and, watching him now, Spock understood the cause of it all too well. Kirk had given him a brief account of what had occurred as they walked to sickbay. The implications of the situation were not lost on the Vulcan and, seeing the new lines around Kirk's eyes, he felt a deep sorrow that he had been responsible for causing his friend so much pain.

McCoy's abrupt movement interrupted his thoughts. The doctor caught his gaze and smiled. "You're fine, Mr. Spock. Perfectly normal readings -- normal, that is, for you." McCoy turned back to Kirk. "Whatever happened to him caused no damage."

"Then he's free to go."

"Yes. He's yours."

Spock rose to a sitting position, swung his legs over the edge of the bed, and stood up. "Captain, I would appreciate reviewing all data accumulated during the past three days in an attempt to ascertain what has occurred."

Kirk nodded. "I thought you might. I'll have all the information fed into the computer outlet in Briefing Room A. We can go over it together while Chekov's getting your tricorder report ready." He turned toward McCoy. "Care to sit in, Doctor?"

McCoy shook his head. "No thanks, Jim. You'll just bore me to death with a lot of technical buzz words. You two go on."

Kirk turned to leave. Spock swung into step beside him in a familiar pattern they had repeated countless times. In the corridor, the two men were stopped several times by crewmembers welcoming back their First Officer. Spock acknowledged each well-wisher in turn. The captain smiled. Finally, the doors of Briefing Room A closed behind them. For the first time since Spock's arrival back on board, they were alone.

The carefully neutral Vulcan facade disappeared with the shutting of the door and, as he looked up at Kirk, his eyes clearly reflected the anguish in his soul. "Jim . . ." He hesitated, searching for the right words. "I am sorry for the . . . trouble I have caused you. I realize how distressing the situation has been." There were so many things, a thousand things, he wanted to say. The words that came were hopelessly inadequate.

Kirk turned to stand directly before him. His expression grew gentle as he watched Spock's fumbling attempts to express his feelings. Spock knew that the captain understood, as always. "It's over with now, my friend," he said softly. "You don't have to say anything. I'm just grateful to have you back."

Spock looked up. Words were, indeed, hopelessly inadequate. Any words. What Kirk needed -- what they both needed -- was something far different. Far more human.

Tentatively, he held out his hands. Kirk responded without hesitation, wrapping him in his arms, pulling him forward in a gentle embrace. Lowering his head, Spock rested it lightly on one strong shoulder as the captain's joy and staggering relief washed over him like a great wave.

After a moment, Kirk let go and took a reluctant step backward. His eyes were filled with tears, but he didn't speak. Words were no longer simply inadequate. They were totally unnecessary. For a moment, they did nothing but look at each other. "You know, Kirk said, breaking the silence at last, "I try to be objective with regards to my crew. But I'm not objective, not by a long shot." He paused. "Sometimes it scares the hell out of me when I realize how much I've come to depend on you -- how important you are to me. Do you know what I mean?"

It was a rhetorical question. Spock, of course, knew exactly what he meant and he nodded his head in acknowledgment. On impulse, drew the captain toward him again. Kirk's arms tightened around his shoulders so firmly that it almost hurt and he wondered abstractly why the intimate contact did not disturb his Vulcan sensibilities. But as soon as the thought entered his mind, he pushed it away. There was nothing to wonder about. He knew why. He loved him. It was as simple as that.

The buzzer at the door sounded. Spock abruptly pulled away and tried to strip the emotion from his face. Kirk gave him a moment to compose himself before turning around to face the doorway. "Come."

Leonard McCoy walked into the room, a knowing look in his eyes. "Thought I'd better sit in on this briefing, after all." He fixed an innocent gaze on the darkened monitor. "I see I haven't missed anything." Moving to the table, he sat down. "Well, are you two going to stand there all day? I have work to do, you know."

Endeavoring to keep the smile from his face, Kirk sat down and Spock moved to sit beside him. The ghost of a smile vanished from the human's face and, flipping on the monitor, he turned toward his First Officer, his manner becoming strictly professional. "I've told you what happened from our end. You simply disappeared. We ran continual tests on everything we could think of and came up with nothing." Pulling up the reports of the past three days, he waited in silence as Spock read through the voluminous records of their search efforts. When the Vulcan finished, he sat back in his chair. "You said earlier that you felt a tingling sensation and then your physical environment changed?" Kirk asked.

Spock nodded. "It felt as if I had stepped through a mild electrical force field. When I glanced up immediately thereafter, the topography of my surroundings was quite different as was the climate and the color of the sky. I was somewhat . . . startled and stepped back rather abruptly. The sensation reoccurred, accompanied by a brief moment of disorientation, then the landscape resumed its natural appearance."

"And that was when Chekov spotted you with the scanners and beamed you back on board," Kirk commented, his fingers drumming lightly on the tabletop. He sat for a moment in thought, then looked up. "It sounds almost as if you passed through a physical warp of some kind." He began to ponder the potential dangers of such an occurrence. If they were in fact dealing with a warp, Starfleet Command would have to be notified.

McCoy leaned forward. "If that had been the case, ship's scanners would have picked up some trace of it, wouldn't they?"

Spock shook his head. "No, Doctor. From the evidence of the search efforts and my own experiences, it would appear that we are dealing with a rip in the dimensional framework. The fact that the scanners picked up no trace of the disturbance tends to support that hypothesis. According to theory, such a dimensional warp would function like an electromagnetic wave, opening on one end -- the point where I stepped through -- and closing behind me. This would explain why no evidence remained for the scanners to register."

"And it reopened again just as you stepped out," Kirk stated.

"Precisely."

"Dear God," McCoy whispered, as the meaning behind the Vulcan's words became clear. "If you'd been a half-second off either way, you would have been standing right in the middle. . . ."

Kirk visibly paled at the words. After a moment of silence, he cleared his throat. "Let's stop speculating and get some facts, shall we, gentlemen?" Leaning forward, he turned on the intercom and signaled the bridge. "Mr. Chekov, is the report from Mr. Spock's tricorder ready yet?"

"Yes, Sir. I just received the signal."

"Channel it down here immediately."

"Aye, aye sir."

They listened in silence as the navigator switched the tricorder's records from the library-science computer to their own. A moment later, the data began to fill the screen. The three men read without interruption. When they were finished, Kirk looked up at his Science Officer. "It would appear that our guess was correct."

Spock's gaze remained focused on the screen when he spoke. "Indeed. A definite physical warp, caused by some as yet unexplained force from the other side."

Kirk pointed to a particular set of entries. "Sentient lifeforms -- indications of a relatively dense center of population eighteen kilometers to the north. Is it possible that it could have been engineered artificially?" Such a scenario could pose a grave threat to their own galaxy.

Spock studied the report for another moment before shaking his head. "I do not believe so, Sir. The report would indicate the level of technological development to be

an earth equivalent of approximately 1397. Manipulated distortion of field densities is beyond even our science."

Kirk allowed himself a subtle sigh of relief. "I agree." He gave Spock a faint smile before turning back to study the monitor once again. "I don't understand," he said softly, "if this were simply a dimensional warp, why there was such a difference in perceptual time? Why would it appear to have been only a few seconds to you when it was three days to us?" Three endless days, he thought to himself.

Spock regarded him with a sorrowful gaze, clearly discerning the captain's thoughts. But when he spoke again, he betrayed none of it in his voice. "Distortions of this nature are very poorly understood. When physical laws are," he paused, searching for the proper word, "'bent' as it were, there is, during the period of disruption, no parameters for reality. The two universes do not tie in together. I was physically absent from this dimension for three days, but only present in the other one for approximately four seconds. There does not have to be a correlation because the distortion circumvents the laws of physics, at least as far as we understand them."

McCoy zeroed in on a minor entry, almost a footnote in the mass of information. "There was a lifeform, Spock, barely ten feet from where you were standing. Do you see it?"

The Vulcan peered at the monitor. One eyebrow rose. A brief expression of concern flashed across his face. The look did not escape Kirk's attention. "What can you make of it, Bones?" Despite the fact that the question was directed at McCoy, the captain's gaze remained on Spock.

"It's a child, I would say judging by the head size relative to that of the body. A female, but its not humanoid, more like a reptilian form." The doctor's eyes narrowed. "Warm blooded though. I'll need further tests to be certain."

She's the only sentient being within a five mile radius. That in and of itself indicates an accidental occurrence." Kirk commented. "Surely if the warp had been planned, the area would have shown evidence of more lifeforms."

"That would seem to be a reasonable assumption," the Vulcan commented.

Kirk glanced over at him. "Do you have any theories at all as to what caused it, Spock?"

"Negative, Sir. The tricorder gives indications of molecular disruptions, magnetic flow irregularities, but it was not in operation long enough to render any significant findings. I shall need to run further tests in order to form a suitable hypothesis."

Kirk sat back for a moment in thought. "Starfleet Command will want a detailed analysis of the situation. Even if the warp is naturally occurring, it could open again and pose a threat to our universe."

"Agreed. It may still be possible to extract data from the physical environment of the planet. Sensors will, of course, function to greater effect if they are located on the surface."

Kirk met his gaze, a thousand emotions in his eyes, the most obvious of which was a very deep reluctance. After a moment, he rose to his feet. The ship could possibly be endangered by the phenomenon, as could the entire galaxy. It would not have been the first time that a dimensional warp had threatened all existence. And Spock was, unfortunately, the most qualified man to lead the science team. McCoy had certified him fit. Kirk had no valid reasons for ordering him to remain on the Enterprise. Apart, of course, from the horror of the past three days.

He finally voiced his decision. "Organize a fully equipped monitoring team, Mr. Spock, and have it ready to transport to the planet in one hour."

"Very well, Sir." The Vulcan stood up.

McCoy remained seated. "Do you want me to go along, Captain?"

Kirk shook his head. "No. I see no need for it at this point. Just be ready for a call in case we need you in a hurry."

McCoy nodded and watched as the two men left the briefing room together. Just as the doors slid shut, he saw the captain lean toward his First Officer and whisper in a nearly inaudible voice, "Stay with someone at all times. Understood?"

Spock turned to face the captain, but the doors closed before McCoy could hear the Vulcan's response.



Sophisticated monitors stood like sentinels surrounding the area where Commander Spock had abruptly reentered his universe. Spock himself moved back and forth amidst the sensitive scanners, studying their reports, adjusting the finely tuned settings, conferring in muted tones with the personnel manning each piece of equipment. The scanners had been in operation for four days. So far, they had turned up nothing.

James Kirk moved to his side. "Anything to report?" He asked, although he could tell from the Vulcan's expression that there was no news.

"No, Captain." Spock continued to study the sensor before him, watching the steady, microscopic sway in the magnetic field as the planet wobbled on its axis. "If my tricorder had only been in operation for a few moments longer, I would have had enough data to determine the probable cause of the dimensional distortion." Spock pressed his lips together. "If I had been more alert . . ."

Kirk put a hand on his wrist. "You were only there for 4.3 seconds. Even for a Vulcan, that's not much time."

Spock's frustration was not abated. "Captain, it is . . ." His words were cut off by the startled cry of a biochemist standing to his left. He and the captain spun instinctively to face the source of the disturbance.

The creature stood before them, its slitted eyes widened with a mixture of terror and surprise. For an instant, the other dimensional landscape was visible behind it, the sky a menacing chocolate brown. A streak of lightning sliced through the air, illuminating the giant thunderheads towering thirty thousand feet into the stratosphere. For the briefest instant, the thunder rumbled across the dimensional breach.

Then the warp began to close, fading away like a bizarre after-image. Sensors whirled as three dozen scientists aimed their scanners at the center of the distortion, gathering as much data as its brief appearance allowed. Spock ran his fingers across the monitor before him, hitting a dozen buttons at once. His eyes flashed back and forth from the vanishing warp to the alien to the panel.

Kirk's gaze remained on the creature. It stood on its hind legs, its torso and upper extremities covered in a loose-fitting, coarsely woven fabric. The clothes were dirty and tattered, hanging off the body in shreds, revealing the scabs and running sores that oozed from beneath it. The alien staggered, then weakly held its arms out before it in a protective gesture as several of the scientists made a move forward. The lips pulled back to reveal a series of sharply pointed teeth. The creature hissed.

"Stay back!" Kirk ordered.

The others stopped. The alien turned to stare at Kirk in wild-eyed horror. The mouth opened and a series of high-pitched sounds filled the air, a rapid string of words punctuated by rasping intakes of air as the creature appeared to struggle for breath.

Kirk sensed Spock move a step closer to him. "An inhabitant from the other side, I presume," he whispered.

"Yes, Captain. It registers as a warm blooded reptilian lifeform, but the readings are weak and fluctuating."

Its arms extended out at either side, the creature shuffled forward, then back, the square head swiveling from side to side as it scanned its suddenly unfamiliar environment. Throwing its head back, the alien turned its face toward the sky and let out a long, mournful scream before sinking to its knees. The angular chin sank against the breastbone protruding like a shield across its chest. Two heavy membranes slid down from beneath the overhanging brows and partially obscured the eyes.

Kirk took a step forward and pulled out his communicator. When Uhura answered, he spoke, his voice soft and level. "Lieutenant, get McCoy down here with sterilization gear immediately. We have found what appears to be a very sick lifeform."

Uhura mimicked his tone, acknowledging his order in a whisper. Kirk, seeing the alien raise its head, put the communicator away, his movements slow and easy. The creature continued to watch him. Kirk put his hands out, palms upraised in a gesture of nonaggression. The alien attempted to rise to its feet, but, reaching the limits of its strength, fell forward and lay twitching feebly, uttering soft, wavering cries.

Spock moved once again to the captain's side, holding the tricorder out before him. "Lifeform readings are very weak. The creature appears to be dying."

Kirk looked back over his shoulder. "Where's . . . ?"

The shimmering beams of the transporter glowed before him, answering his unspoken question. McCoy was raising his mediscanner toward the alien before the lingering sounds of the beam had faded from the air. At his left, M'Benga stood, a series of alternative scanners held in his arms.

"What happened, Captain?" McCoy continued to scrutinize the alien as he spoke.

Kirk nodded toward the creature. "An inhabitant from the other side. It crossed through the warp a few moments ago."

McCoy looked down at the scanner in his hands. "M'Benga, you getting the same readings?"

"Yes, Doctor."

McCoy studied the alien and cautiously took a step forward. The creature's head rolled around to look at him. Silently it watched his approach, clearly too weak to move. McCoy reached its side and knelt down on one knee. He ran a rapid scan, then silently held his arm out behind him. M'Benga placed another sensor in his hand and McCoy repeated the action. The alien twisted its head to look directly into McCoy's eyes. The doctor smiled. "We won't hurt you. We're here to help you if we can. Just lie still."

The creature stared at him without comprehension. A spasm gripped it and the wasted form shuddered and cried out in a series of rapid, chirping sounds. McCoy pulled out a hypo and injected the contents into the creature's shoulder. The spasms stopped almost instantly and the alien fixed him with a wondering gaze. There was a peculiar change of expression as the lips twisted back in an open-mouthed grimace, a gesture that McCoy took to be a smile. He smiled back and resisted the temptation to touch the creature reassuringly on the arm.

After a few minutes, McCoy finished his scan and stood up, the alien's gaze following him as he rose to his feet. He turned toward the captain. "I don't register any harmful alien bacterial or viral organisms." He hesitated for a moment. "I don't think he poses any danger to the crew, but without more tests I can't be certain. I'd recommend putting him in isolation until we can get a better picture."

"What's wrong with him?" Kirk studied the semiconscious creature before him.

McCoy looked down at the scanner in his hand. "I'd rather not speculate until I've run some more tests, Captain." The doctor then turned and crouched at the alien's side. Kirk knew him well enough to recognize an evasion when he saw it and did not press the issue. Spock stood at his side, silently watching.



James T. Kirk swiveled his chair around to face the science station. Spock stood, bent forward over the viewer as he studied the reports flashing before him. As if sensing the captain's scrutiny, he straightened abruptly and turned to face him.

Kirk stood up. "Something?"

"Yes, Sir. I believe I have just ascertained the cause of the distortion."

The captain walked rapidly to his side. "Report."

Relief was clearly evident in the Vulcan's eyes. "The warp was the result of a natural phenomenon, Captain -- a unique occurrence that will not reappear."

Kirk felt the muscles in his back begin to relax. "Explain," he said softly.

"Our sensors were able to derive much information from the warped space during the alien's passage through it. The atmosphere on the other side contained a high level of ionized hydrogen atoms that computers indicate was the result of the planet passing through a comet's tail. The planet has an unstable magnetic field and the ionized particles coincided with a high level of magnetic disruption from the core of the planet. The combined effect of disruptions from beneath the surface and in the atmosphere resulted in a distortion of the physical fields, creating the warp."

"But why here? Why only one?"

"The magnetic field is strongest here. As the planet rotates, its magnetic flow becomes distorted, similar to what occurs on your sun. When the magnetic flow lines fall too far behind the rotation, they polarize, break away from the main currents and erupt at the surface."

"Solar flares."

Spock nodded. "Yes, Captain. On a gaseous planet with a fusion core, the result is a flare. On a solid, iron-based body, the effect is less visually dramatic, but no less significant. However, the disruptions would be contained within the mantle and would not have been noticeable on the surface unless there were atmospheric charges present to draw it out."

"Like water draws out electricity," Kirk surmised.

"An appropriate choice of terms. The comet ionized the atmosphere at the exact moment that the magnetic imbalance reached its height."

"And when the planet's revolution carried it through the tail as the comet left the solar system, the disruption happened again."

"Correct. The odds of such an occurrence are approximately twenty-eight billion to one. The probability of it happening again is so slight as to render it a point of theoretical interest only."

Kirk paused for a moment in thought. "Some of those scanner reports indicate at least two hundred and eighty inhabitants in that valley," he said, bringing up a peculiarity that, for some reason, had been bothering him all day. "It's not really surprising, then, that our visitor crossed through." He rubbed his fingertips against his lips. "But I wonder what they were doing there? When no one was there when you crossed through. Strange . . ."

He glanced up. "How much time between the two occurrences -- from their point of reference?"

One eyebrow rose by a fraction. "Approximately one hundred and ninety-six days."

Kirk shook his head as if to shake off the sense of foreboding that was beginning to seize hold of him. "I don't understand what they were . . . "

The intercom at the captain's chair buzzed, cutting off the words. Kirk leaned over Spock's panel and flipped the switch. "Kirk here."

"Captain? McCoy. Would you come to sickbay?"

Kirk and Spock exchanged glances. "We'll be right down."

"Jim. . . . " McCoy hesitated. "I'd rather you came down alone."

Spock's brow furrowed. Kirk kept his own expression noncommittal. "On my way."



Leonard McCoy was standing in the center of sickbay's outer room, a stack of computer disks in one hand, as James Kirk crossed through the sickbay doors. The doctor's expression was as grim as Kirk had ever seen it. Kirk felt a leaden knot tighten in the pit of his stomach.

McCoy gestured to his office. "Come in and sit down, Jim."

Kirk went into the smaller room and sat down, waiting silently as McCoy seated himself directly across from him. The doctor studied the disks in his hand. Kirk leaned forward. "What is it, Bones? Is it the alien?"

McCoy looked up. "No, not really. He's been stabilized, though he's extremely weak. I've listed him in critical condition. His chances of survival are poor. Very poor."

McCoy stopped speaking. He stared at the computer disks for a moment, an anguished expression on his face. Looking at him, the captain was filled with a sense of impending doom although he had no idea why. "Bones . . . what's wrong?"

McCoy took a deep breath. "Jim, the alien is suffering from pneumonic sporaccia."

For an instant, Kirk's mind seemed to go blank. Sporaccia. He knew of the disease, would never forget that name for as long as he lived. Spock had nearly died from it four years before. A rare and deadly virus resembling smallpox, Spock had contracted it from a contaminated Vegan trader during a provisioning trip to the Alcor colonies. The standard inoculations had not responded to his hybrid chemistry, a lesson Starfleet learned only after the disease had nearly taken his life. McCoy's constant

care and twenty-third century medicine had pulled Spock through the ordeal, but Kirk could still recall the horrifying pain that even Vulcan controls could not overcome, the lesions that covered his body, the twitching limbs. He glanced over to the clear plastiform wall sealing off the isolation chamber. "What are you saying, Bones?" The words were hardly above a whisper.

McCoy folded his hands before him, his grip so tight that his fingers blanched. He took another deep breath. "I'm saying that the alien is suffering from pneumonic sporaccia of a type identical to the virus within Spock's system."

Kirk resisted the temptation to stand. "That virus mutated into a benign form. You told me that four years ago."

McCoy shook his head. "Yes, Jim. Benign for us." He dropped his gaze to the tightly clenched hands and, seeing the whitened fingers, pulled them apart. "Dear God, I would have given anything to have found a different answer. I suspected on the planet, but hoped that I was wrong."

"But how could Spock have affected anyone? He was only in that dimensional plane for four seconds. It's impossible."

"No, Captain." McCoy sighed. "It's not. Remember that physical I gave Spock when he was beamed back on board? I told you then that he was in perfect condition and he was -- with one very minor exception. A cut -- a minor one -- hardly showed up on my monitors, it was so small."

The doctor glanced up, his face ashen. "The cut bled, Jim. He must have been holding something that caused the injury. And he dropped it. It'd be instinctive, to drop it without thinking. The girl must have seen it fall and picked it up after he disappeared."

McCoy closed his eyes. "Lord knows what she must have told the people in her village, with him appearing and disappearing like that. You know how those things grow into legends in a primitive culture. I wouldn't be surprised if everyone within a ten mile radius touched it before that first day was over."

Kirk shook his head, resisting the doctor's explanation. "No. It must be a coincidence, a similar virus. . . ."

"Captain," McCoy's voice was sharp, despite his anguish. "I would never have voiced this if I wasn't certain. I've run molecular scans. The virus isn't similar, it's identical. There's no doubt as to the source of the contamination."

Aware of the pounding of his heart, Kirk forced his voice to be controlled when he spoke again. "Can you tell how widely the contamination has spread?"

McCoy shook his head. "No, just that the alien on board ship shows a marked susceptibility to the virus; lungs extremely vulnerable to damage, little immunological protection of any kind. Apparently, there were no serious pneumonic diseases on the planet before . . . " McCoy's voice trailed off and for a moment, the room was silent.

"Just like the inhabitants of Sigma Elorianus." Kirk said the words softly as he studied the faint imperfections on the surface of the desk. "Do you recall, the accidental contamination five years ago?"

The doctor nodded. He remembered. Inadvertent infection was always a danger. Federation inoculations were supposed to cover everything, but, of course, such total protection was impossible. "I'm sorry, Jim."

Kirk regarded him in silence for a long moment as a look of despair filled his eyes. "This will kill him, Bones."

McCoy leaned forward and lay a hand on his friend's arm. "We may still be able to contain some of the damage. We can set up an emergency medical unit on the planet. When the warp opens again, I can have volunteers ready to cross over to vaccinate everyone on the planet if need be. We can still save a large. . . ."

"It won't open again."

McCoy stiffened. "What?"

"I said it won't open again. Spock determined what was causing it. He told me just a few moments ago that it was a unique phenomenon and won't reoccur."

"No chance?" McCoy's voice sounded pleading.

"No."

McCoy ran his fingers through his hair. Kirk rose to his feet. "I'll tell him." He stated.

"I'll do it." McCoy countered. The tone in the doctor's voice was filled with uncertainty. It was clear that he did not relish the idea.

Kirk shook his head. "No thanks, Bones. It's my place." He turned silently on one heel and left without turning back. McCoy watched him go. He remembered the unfortunate Elorianus incident all too well. A Starfleet ensign who had been skipped in a minor inoculation had infested an entire population with a bacterial infection. The bacteria had proliferated, mutated into a ghastly parody of its former self and had swept through the virgin population like smallpox through the Indians of North America. Two hundred thousand inhabitants had died before the rampage was finally halted. The ensign responsible, despite assurances that he was not at fault, blamed himself. Two weeks after the deaths began, he had killed himself.

McCoy stretched his hands out on the desk before him, staring mutely into the blank surface. After a moment, he stood up and left the room.



Kirk walked to the turbolift, his stride long and seemingly effortless. The doors slid open and he stepped inside, standing in silence as the lift took him up. Externally

he appeared calm. Inside, where no one save his empathic First Officer would be able to see, he was in turmoil.

The doors opened. Of the personnel manning the bridge, only Spock turned to look at him as he stepped from the turbolift. He walked rapidly to the Vulcan's side, aware of the concerned expression on Spock's normally emotionless face.

"Mr. Spock." His voice was low. Spock stiffened imperceptibly, clearly sensing the captain's anguish. "Will you come with me please? There is something we have to discuss."

The Vulcan nodded without question and motioned for Chekov to take over his station. Together the two men walked back to the turbolift. Just as the doors closed, Kirk turned to Uhura. "We'll be in Briefing Room A, Lieutenant."

The doors closed before she could reply.



Spock sat in silence, watching the captain as he searched for words. Kirk was agitated. The emotional emanations were washing over Spock like a series of waves, although little of it was visible on the surface. He watched Kirk pace the length of the briefing room, stop by the far wall and turn back to face him. "Spock . . . Doctor McCoy has just informed me of something . . . " He hesitated.

Spock could see Kirk's pale face turn a shade whiter. A flash of panic shot through him. He rose to his feet. "Jim, are you unwell?"

An aching sad smile touched Kirk's mouth. He shook his head. "No. It has nothing to do with me."

Kirk moved to the chair and sat down. Despite the captain's words, Spock was not convinced. To his discerning eye, Kirk appeared weary -- more weary, in fact, than he had ever seen him before.

Kirk glanced up to see Spock still standing over him. The sorrowful smile returned and he gestured to the empty chair. "Sit, please."

Spock sat down, his eyes never straying from Kirk's face.

For a moment, the captain simply sat, looking at him. Spock felt the disturbing urge to shift his weight, but repressed it. Then, the captain drew in a deep, shuddering breath, as if bracing himself for what was about to come. "Spock, the alien we took aboard is suffering from sporaccia," he said softly.

For an instant, Spock would have sworn that his heart quite literally stopped beating. And, for one of the few times in his life, his mind went completely blank.

But not for long. He felt his face pale as the blood drained away along with the merciful numbness. Realization took its place, the crystal clear workings of the Vulcan mind informing him of the meaning behind Kirk's words, of the devastation he

had unknowingly wrought upon an unsuspecting world. And, with the objective facts came the Human response -- a sad, guilt-ridden legacy of his mother's people. Blame, sorrow, anguish, despair, a thousand thoughts and ghastly images flooding his mind at once, all wrapped around a shroud of futility and helplessness.

He could not begin to deal with it. Or with the captain who sat watching him, seemingly staring directly into his very soul. Bowing his head to avoid Kirk's discerning gaze, he focused on the floor, frantically attempting to master the turmoil within him.

Out of the corner of his eye, Spock saw the captain stretch his arm out across the table. Kirk's fingers hung in the air for a moment, offering the consolation Spock so desperately needed, and he very nearly reached out in response.

However, the Vulcan part of him would not permit it. Caution, it seemed to say. Withdraw. Repress. With the words came a stinging rebuke, berating him for his flagrant loss of control -- for allowing himself to even contemplate accepting Kirk's offer.

Spock suddenly felt disoriented. Danger signs loomed everywhere. There was only one possible avenue of escape. One he had used so many times before, until it had seemed almost second nature to him. There were instances, many instances, when he was certain it had saved his sanity. He began to retreat, distancing himself from the emotional pain and confusion that threatened for a moment to overwhelm him. He felt Kirk's stare and saw that the captain continued to reach out into the empty space between them. Gritting his teeth, he fixed his eyes on the floor at his feet and did not look up, did not stretch out his hand.

Thirty seconds of silence passed before Kirk reluctantly pulled his arm back to rest at his side. A deceptive stillness filled the room. The Vulcan was the first to break it. His low voice was loud in the quiet of the briefing room. "I am, of course, the source of the contamination." The tone was noncommittal.

"I'm sorry, Spock." Kirk's tone was clear, suffused with understanding and compassion. Despite his own attempts to speak unemotionally, the captain was reading him as accurately now as he had on the planet a lifetime ago.

Spock rose to his feet, determined to sublimate his emotional weaknesses, to regain control. He clasped his hands behind his back where Kirk could not see them. The grip was so tight that it cut off the circulation to his fingers.

"Was the doctor able to ascertain the extent of the . . . damage?" Internally, he recoiled at the unconscious hesitation. His fingers tightened their grip until the bones threatened to crack.

Kirk regarded him with sadness. "No, not really. We may learn more should the alien regain consciousness."

Spock retreated once again, forcing his mind into the Vulcan controls that were as much a part of him as breathing. The barriers, fortified with years of discipline, began to harden. They turned from glass to wood to metal, insulating him from the hurt as they had all of his life. He straightened his back. "Thank you for telling me in private, Captain. If there is nothing else, I shall return to my station."

"Spock, I think we should talk about it."

"The contamination was inadvertent. The warp is closed and no attempts at aid are possible. There is nothing to discuss. It is done."

The wall that Spock had thrown up around himself solidified. He felt an insulating coolness fill his mind and, for the first time since the captain's startling revelation, he looked him straight in the eye. "If you will excuse me, Sir, I shall return to the bridge."

"No. Not yet. Please, Spock, talk to me." Kirk pleaded.

Knowing that Kirk would not let him go until he confronted the issue, he relentlessly stripped all trace of emotion from his face. "Captain, even for a Vulcan, there are inevitable emotional repercussions from such an occurrence as this, but mental disciplines will enable me to overcome them. I thank you for your concern, but assure you that I shall be all right."

Kirk sat watching him, trying to read something in his unreadable face. Spock inclined his head. "If you will excuse me?" He calmly awaited for the captain to give his reluctant permission. When at last Kirk freed him, he turned and was gone.



Spock was at his station when Kirk stepped from the turbolift. Kirk saw the Vulcan stiffen as he straightened and turned around to acknowledge Kirk's presence. The captain smiled. Spock hesitated, then nodded his head in response before turning back to his console and resuming his work. Kirk stared at his back for a moment before going to his command chair.

The shift was nearly over, but the remaining time seemed endless. Kirk resisted the temptation to turn back to the science station without cause and spent most of the remainder of the shift staring down at the planet rotating below them. He drummed his fingers along the console, careful to keep the touch light and inaudible. Behind him, he knew that Spock must hear the evidence of his restlessness, but that too was left unspoken.

Finally the doors opened behind him and Montgomery Scott walked on to the bridge. Kirk swiveled around and gave his engineer a warm smile. "She's all yours, Scotty." Standing up, he walked casually to the science station and leaned against the railing. Spock remained facing his panel.

"Mr. Spock?"

Slowly, the Vulcan turned around. He seemed to be cast in concrete. Kirk tilted his head. "Let's go get something to eat."

"I am not hungry, Captain."

Kirk clenched his jaw, but managed a smile. "Then a workout in the gym. It will help take the edge off."



"I am not on edge." The words were clipped. Kirk's smile faded and Spock looked away, studying the panel before him. "Please, Jim." The words were barely above a whisper. "Allow me to deal with this in my own way."

Something in Kirk's mind rebelled. His instincts told him that Spock was wrong in his attempt to repress the inner turmoil that he could sense beneath the calm exterior.

Spock looked up at him, clearly reading the captain's thoughts. Imperceptively, he nodded his head. "Very well." Rising to his feet, he walked to the turbolift, standing aside to allow Kirk to precede him inside. The doors closed.

"After you left my quarters, I sent a full report to Starfleet Command." Kirk spoke the words softly into the silence that had stretched out between them.

Spock raised an eyebrow in what, to Kirk, seemed a pathetic gesture of normality. "Indeed? The Council will undoubtedly find the warp to be an interesting phenomenon."

Kirk turned to look at him. "I'm not talking about the warp. I'm talking about the contamination." Spock was silent. Kirk moved around to stand directly before him. "Mr. Spock, I think we should discuss this."

Spock looked down at him. His expression was as bland as the captain had ever seen it. "We have already discussed the matter. It was an unavoidable occurrence. It would be illogical to hold myself responsible for something over which I had no control." Spock's voice was flat.

Kirk watched without replying. Spock looked away and focused on the wall. "You must remember, Captain, that I am not a Human and should not be expected to react as such."

To this, James Kirk made no answer.

The turbolift arrived and the doors opened to face the gymnasium. The two men spent the next hour engaged in an intensive workout, but Spock's heart was not in it and Kirk narrowly avoided injuring him when the Vulcan failed to defend himself. Spock went through the motions, but his thoughts were elsewhere and the captain found the uncharacteristic preoccupation disturbing.

After the workout, Kirk stepped in to take a sonic shower. When he came out again a moment later, Spock was nowhere to be seen.



Leonard McCoy stepped out from the isolation room and, pulling off his sterile suit, dropped it down the disposal chute. Turning around, he gasped in surprise at seeing Spock standing only inches away.

"I am sorry, Doctor. I did not intend to startle you." Spock looked away from the chamber and at McCoy. He stood stiffly, his hands clasped behind his back.

"It's all right, Spock."

The Vulcan's gaze wandered back toward the isolation chamber. The alien, wrapped in synthetic bandages and attached to various tubes and monitors, was visible through the transparency. Spock stared at the unmoving form. For a fraction of a second, a look of intense pain was discernible in his eyes. McCoy saw it. He clasped a hand firmly around Spock's arm. "Come into my office. We have to talk."

Spock's eyebrow rose in surprise at the doctor's direct approach, but he did not pull out of McCoy's grasp. He allowed the doctor to guide him into the adjoining room. That alone told McCoy volumes about Spock's emotional condition.

"Sit down." McCoy stated.

Spock obediently sat. He fixed McCoy with a look of insufferable superiority. It did not work. McCoy was professional now and would not allow himself to be sidetracked. He sat before Spock and regarded him with such intense scrutiny that the Vulcan had to consciously resist the temptation to look away.

"You might be able to pull that Vulcan routine on Jim, but it won't flush down here, Spock. You're experiencing a lot of emotional pain over this and I know it."

Spock looked at him without expression. McCoy's eyes narrowed. "I know you, Spock. You're a lot more human than you let on. You've infected a population with a plague for which they have a marked susceptibility. I can't tell you how many have died, but I can tell you that the number must be very high. You know how these things spread as well as I do. You read my log reports."

Spock's eyes widened slightly at this bit of information. McCoy leaned forward. "Don't underestimate me, Spock. I know what's going on around here. When someone taps my medical files, even the First Officer of the *Enterprise*, I make it my business to know about it. You can attempt to hide the fact that you read those reports, access my log entries through your computer anonymously, and put on that Vulcan face of yours. But I'm telling you from a medical point of view, it won't work. McCoy hesitated for a second. "And you're going to have to come to terms with what happened."

"I have come to terms with it, Doctor." Spock did not open his eyes.

"No you haven't. You've ignored it, buried it under a ton of Vulcan denial."

"I will handle the situation. It is not your concern."

McCoy grabbed his arm. "It is my concern, damn it! The emotional well-being of this crew, especially of its command personnel, is very much my concern and you know it!"

Spock opened his eyes and looked up at him, his expression cold. McCoy nearly pulled his arm away but, refusing to be intimidated, he kept his hand on the Vulcan's rigid arm. Despite the forbidding facade, Spock suddenly appeared very vulnerable to him and McCoy abruptly decided on a change of tactics. He relaxed his grip and his expression softened. "What would the Jim say if I gave his First Officer anything less

than first class attention. He wouldn't talk to me for a week." McCoy smiled faintly. "Now you wouldn't wish that on me, would you?"

The doctor's instincts were still good. It was the right thing to say. The captain was Spock's weak point and McCoy knew it. He would hold himself together for Kirk's sake long after he had given up on his own. McCoy watched as the hardness began to fade from the Vulcan's eyes. "Doctor . . ." Spock seemed on the verge of stretching his hand out across the table, reaching out for the understanding that was not too close. "Doctor . . . I . . ."

The doors to sickbay slid open at that instant and two crewmen stumbled inside, supporting a white-faced engineering technician between them. The man sagged at the knees, holding his right arm out before him. Blood dripped off his fingertips, spattering the floor in a grotesque pattern.

McCoy rose to his feet and ran to the man's side. "What happened?" He helped the injured man to the diagnostic bed and eased him down.

"He was installing a conduit on deck six, just below here. He slipped and caught his arm on an exposed joining cable."

McCoy disinfected and sealed the wound as he listened. The technician was young, barely out of his teens. McCoy smiled. "What's your name, son."

"Ensign Holden, Sir."

"Well, Ensign Holden, it looks a lot worse than is. I'll have you back on the job in no time."

The young man smiled and some of the color came back into his face. He watched intently as McCoy finished tending the wound and walked, aided by his two friends, out of sickbay for an unplanned day's rest in his quarters.

McCoy watched him go, grateful that the wound was not serious. He had Spock at the point where his Vulcan shields were beginning to come down and he was anxious to get back to him before the barriers slammed back into place again.

McCoy hurriedly washed the blood from his hands and walked back into his office. He stopped at the doorway, not really surprised with the sight that awaited him. The room was empty. Spock was gone.



It was one day later when the **Enterprise** received a reply from Starfleet Command. The Federation had studied the Kirk's report in great detail and, concurring with First Officer Spock's analysis of the situation that the warp presented no danger, ordered the **Enterprise** back to her previous patrol route. The colonizing survey would be terminated; the timid people requesting it having abruptly decided to remain within the safety of their home planet.

Starfleet officials had commented tersely on the Vulcan's accidental contamination, noting that the entire affair was unfortunate but, as one official hygienically put it, "these things happen." Kirk had bitten back an acerbic comment at this last statement.

Spock, standing at the captain's side, had listened to the message without expression. After the transmission ended, Kirk searched his friend's face, seeking the slightest betrayal of the emotion he knew lay buried beneath the icy facade, but there was none. Spock had made no mention of the alien and, apart from his one visit to sickbay, had totally ignored his presence.

Slowly, Kirk leaned forward and shut off the monitor. He signaled the bridge. "Mr. Chekov, plot us a course back to our previous patrol route. Leave orbit when ready."

Chekov hesitated before replying. "Yes, Sir."

Kirk switched off the intercom. Starfleet's order had surprised his young navigator, but he had expected it. The *Enterprise* was needed on patrol. There was nothing to be gained by remaining in orbit around this empty world.

He looked over at Spock. The Vulcan stood, as silent as a statue, staring straight ahead. "It is illogical," he intoned, his gaze fixed on the wall, "for the Altharians to abandon their colonizing plans over this one incident. It has already been determined that the warp will not reoccur."

Kirk regarded him sadly. "You know the Altharians. They're superstitious. They think the incident will bring them bad luck."

"Superstition has no place in a scientific society." Spock stated.

Kirk turned to face him directly, knowing that Spock would not deliberately insult him by avoiding eye contact. The Vulcan's gaze flickered reluctantly from the wall and came to rest on his captain's face. Kirk had never seen him so unreachable.

"If you will excuse me, Captain, I have sensor readjustments on the bridge to complete." Spock began to move toward the door.

"Mr. Spock?"

The Vulcan stopped and slowly turned back. "Yes, Sir."

"Are you all right?"

"Yes. I am quite well."

Kirk flinched. Kirk had heard Spock use those exact words before, words that pitifully attempted to conceal an emotional state that was far from all right. He was about to speak again when Spock cut him off.

"Am I performing my duties in an unsatisfactory manner?"

Kirk's instincts warned him to pull back. "No. Your performance is, as usual, flawless."

"In that case, Captain, I fail to see the cause for your concern." Kirk regarded him in silence and after a moment Spock looked away, staring once again at the featureless wall. "May I have your permission to go?"

Recognizing the Vulcan's inflexibility, Kirk nodded his head. "Yes, Mr. Spock. I'll follow you up in a few minutes."

Spock stepped toward the door, then hesitated, as if to say something, but abruptly changed his mind. Pressing his lips together, he turned and left the room.

Kirk watched until the doors shut behind him. He had always thought that he could reach Spock, regardless of the circumstances. This time, however, the Vulcan had walled himself up alive and the captain was powerless to help him. Kirk sank down into a chair and leaned forward, running his fingers wearily through his hair. He massaged his neck, but the headache that had been a part of him for the last several hours refused to go away.



The bridge was quiet. Everyone worked with the silent efficiency brought by years of experience. The incident on the planet they had left behind eight hours ago was on everyone's mind, but, of course, no one mentioned it.

Kirk tilted his head to one side and glanced unobtrusively over at Spock. The Vulcan sat, working on a computer program. He appeared intently involved in his work and Kirk watched him for a moment as he adjusted a dozen dials on his panel, his expression one of single-minded attention.

The intercom at the captain's arm broke the silence. Kirk saw the muscles in Spock's back tense at the sound, the only indication he gave that he had even heard its call. Kirk turned back to face the viewscreen and flipped the switch. "Kirk here."

"Captain . . . ? It's McCoy . . . "

Kirk straightened, sensing disaster in McCoy's voice. "Yes, Bones? What is it?"

"The alien, Captain . . . " McCoy's voice was barely above a whisper. "He just died."



The body was immersed in chemical preservatives and put into stasis. McCoy carefully adjusted the chamber, moderating the pressure as the air was slowly drawn out. He had spent the past hour preparing the corpse, hoping as he worked that he was

not inadvertently breaking any of the creature's cultural or religious taboos. Such beliefs meant little to him, but he knew that they held great significance to many other inhabitants of this universe and probably of the other one as well. The doctor was, above all else, a respecter of life in all its myriad forms and manifestations. He had been unable to help the alien in this life. He hoped now that he did not cause it any further suffering in the next one.

The stasis dial registered zero and the creature floated, its skin rendered impermeable by the chemicals, preventing it from rupturing in the vacuum. It could stay suspended in here forever if need be and would look just the same in a thousand years as it looked right now.

But it would not be here for a thousand years. The *Enterprise* would swing near the planet of the creature's birth in a years time. When she did so, the alien would be buried in the soil of his home. An honor guard -- a sad final gesture that quite possibly held no meaning -- would accompany the creature to his final resting place, where he would be interred in the ground that was and yet was not his home. It was as near as they could bring him, the best that they could do. In the meantime, his body would be kept here, waiting.

McCoy finished his work and, reaching up, he lowered the screens and sealed off the cubicle, grateful when the last lingering sight of the interior was cut off from view. At least your suffering in this life is over. McCoy's thoughts strayed along the familiar path they had traveled a thousand times in the past day, in the past hour. Blasted Vulcan. Why won't you at least let Jim inside that private hell of yours. Stupid, stubborn. . . . McCoy shook his head. It wasn't Spock's fault. He was a victim too. And, not for the first time in his life, McCoy found himself condemning the repressive Vulcan lifestyle that had forged the bars of Spock's prison. Forged them, iron-hard, impenetrable, insulating him from everything. Yeah. McCoy thought to himself bitterly. Everything but yourself.

The doctor reached up, laying an open hand against the wall of the darkened chamber. "At least it's all over for you, my friend." He stood that way for a moment. Then, pulling his hand away, he walked from the room.

The lights, registering the absence of life, dimmed automatically behind him and the room darkened once again.



Three days passed. Leonard McCoy walked into the dining hall and scanned the room. He knew when the First Officer of the *Enterprise* was scheduled to eat his dinner. One thing about Vulcans, he thought to himself wryly, they're dependable. If Spock were scheduled to eat at 2100 hours, he would walk through these doors at exactly 2100 hours.

McCoy himself was late due to a last minute injury requiring his attention. The chronometer on the wall read 2126 when he entered the room. He had not seen Spock all day and, a few minutes before, had almost considered passing the injured crewman on to someone else. But not surprisingly his sense of medical responsibility had won out over his worry about Spock. He was, after all, the only doctor on duty, and knew

that the captain was keeping a close, yet subtle, eye on the silent Vulcan. Still, McCoy knew that Kirk was not a qualified medical observer and was anxious to find Spock before the Vulcan disappeared for the night as was his habit of late. The doctor had hurried from sickbay as soon as he was able.

Stopping at the doorway, McCoy searched through the crowd. He knew that the Vulcan was in the dining room with Kirk but he could not immediately find them. He furrowed his brow and searched amid the people bustling back and forth.

Then the crowd shifted and he spotted the two men. Spock and Kirk sat together at a table in the far corner, apparently deeply engaged in conversation. Their eyes were locked together, but McCoy noted that it was the captain who was doing most of the talking. He hesitated, wondering if he should interrupt. Abruptly, Spock straightened up and fixed Kirk with a withering glare the likes of which the doctor had rarely seen and had never seen directed at the captain. The doctor's mind was made up. He sauntered over to their table, stopping before the empty chair at the Vulcan's side. "Mind if I join you?"

Kirk looked up at him and an unconvincing smile flashed across his face. "By all means, Doctor."

McCoy sat down. Spock nodded his head in silent acknowledgement of the doctor's presence. McCoy scrutinized the meager pile of vegetables on Spock's plate. "Looks good." He smiled into the Vulcan's unsmiling face.

Spock made no response. McCoy tried again. "What is it?"

"It is comprised of ten separate Vulcan vegetables. You would not like it." Spock stated, staring at his food when he spoke. From his voice, it was clear that McCoy's bantering would not be well-received.

Kirk reached out and touched the doctor on the arm. "Go get yourself something to eat, Bones."

McCoy saw the warning in Kirk's eyes and took the hint. He walked slowly to the selector and pressed the first button on the panel, not really caring what it was. He turned back to see Kirk lean forward and speak softly to Spock. The Vulcan looked up at him and uttered a single word, the harsh sound of it standing out amid the jumble of voices that filled the air. Spock looked away, folding his hands on the table before him. Even from across the room, McCoy could see him struggle for control. Kirk spoke to him again, canting his head to one side, attempting to catch the Vulcan's eye. McCoy scooped up his tray, suddenly aware that he was holding up the line, and hurried back to the table. He sat down to a deadly silence. Neither of the two men paid him any attention. His gaze traveled back and forth between them. You could cut the silence with a knife, he thought to himself.

Spock rose to his feet. "If you will excuse me, Captain, Doctor." He gathered up his uneaten dinner and slipped it down the disposal chute before walking rapidly from the room without looking back. Kirk's gaze followed him until he disappeared down the corridor. "Bones," his voice was scarcely above a whisper, "I can't get him to talk about it -- about any of it. He keeps insisting that he's handling the situation. If I push him, he shuts me out completely." Kirk looked over at McCoy. "I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of times he's ever raised his voice to me in anger."

The captain hesitated, his eyes focused on a spot in the distance. "I don't know what to do. I'm worried about him."

McCoy nodded in agreement. "I know, Jim. So am I."

"What are you doing about it?" Kirk's voice was louder now. There was a sharp edge to it that McCoy recognized immediately.

"I'm watching him." Kirk frowned. McCoy hastened to speak again. "It wouldn't be good for him now if I pulled rank and forced him to undergo an evaluation. You know Spock. It wouldn't accomplish anything anyway. He can fool my machines if he wants to. We both know that he can get those dials to read 'normal' even if he's half out of his mind. Besides, I have no medical reason for a psychological examination. He's doing everything letter perfect; no slips, no blunders. A harsh word now and again," he gave Kirk a knowing look, "even one directed against you, hardly qualifies as sufficient reason for forcing an exam. In a way, I wish he'd go put his fist through a wall, scream at somebody, make a mistake, anything," McCoy sighed. "But he's gone all Vulcan on us and . . ."

"Don't give me that 'all Vulcan' routine, Doctor." Kirk's voice was icy. "You know he needs help in dealing with this. Is it your intention to wait until he has a breakdown before you do anything? You really don't need an excuse for calling him down. You're Chief Medical Officer of the Enterprise. Your suspicions are grounds enough." The captain glared at him, the anger in his tone unmistakable.

McCoy met his gaze evenly. "Jim, if I forced him into a medical examination now, it would only exacerbate his anxiety and drive him deeper into his shell. It'll put him on the defensive and that's the last thing we want to have happen."

Kirk's jaw tensed. "So what should we do?"

"Wait." McCoy sighed. "We wait."



Spock stood by the railing on the observation deck, watching the stars that spread out before him in a brilliant pattern. The huge window faced the heart of the galaxy now and Spock found his mind teased by the metaphysical questions of scale. There was so much vastness. What was the fate of one tiny planet in all of this, a planet not even a part of this universe at all? And it wasn't even the fate of one planet, but simply the lifeforces of an unknown number of creatures who dwelt upon it. Surely it did not hold significance in the cosmic order of things. Such an argument was logical, was it not?

Spock almost smiled at the irony. Defending a metaphysical argument on logical grounds was an inherent contradiction in terms. Worse, even, was using that argument to rationalize away the destruction of sentient creatures. More than a contradiction -- a travesty, a corruption of the beliefs he had thought were a part of his very being. Spock lowered his head. He was indeed a failure -- a mockery of the ideal Vulcan. He mouthed the words like some kind of parrot, but they were no more a part of him than his Human heritage. He felt a sob swell in his throat and fought

savagely to force it back down. His hands clenched so tightly around the railing that he felt the metal compress. The grip was painful, but he didn't care. It brought a strange sort of relief and he squeezed it again. At least the pain was real.

"Spock?"

The unexpected sound so startled him that he quite literally jumped backward. Kirk was standing behind him, concern etched into his features. The captain smiled sadly. "I've been looking for you. I've paged your quarters every fifteen minutes for the last four hours."

Spock knew. He had been prowling the corridors all night and had been near enough to his room on two previous occasions to hear the soft call of the intercom. It didn't take telepathic powers to know who was calling. Spock had ignored both calls. Kirk could read him too well and Spock knew that he was far too vulnerable to permit the captain to see him in his present state.

"I'm sorry if I startled you. I thought you'd have heard me coming."

"I was . . . meditating." Spock turned away. "Please, Captain. I wish to be alone."

Kirk reached out to touch his arm. "Don't shut me out, Spock. Please."

He shook off Kirk's touch. "Leave me alone."

"Spock?" The captain grabbed at his arm.

"I said leave me alone!" The Vulcan's words rang out into the air. The few other occupants of the observation deck turned to stare at him in astonishment. Spock froze, a shocked expression on his face at the outburst. He turned away, turned toward the stars, but did not see them. His eyes were closed, clenched so tightly that it drove the blood away from the skin around them. "I wish to meditate, Captain. Please . . . go away."

Kirk backed off. Spock could sense his almost overwhelming need to reach out, but he dared not relax his guard. The captain was his one fatal weakness and he knew that if he gave in to Kirk's consolation, his entire defensive structure would collapse. And he could not bear the thought of anyone, even the captain, seeing him break down. He could sense the enormous turmoil within him, bubbling like some infernal cauldron, awaiting the tiniest breach in his shields in order to burst out into the light of day. And he knew how woefully ill-equipped he was to deal with such emotional trauma. The thought of what he would say, what he would do stripped to the bone like that, filled him with shame and terror. Spock stiffened his back. He would not permit that to happen. He would retain the captain's respect even if it cost him his friendship.

"If you want to see me, I'll be in my quarters." Kirk's voice was low, sorrowful. He walked slowly toward the door, turning his head around several times to stare into the Vulcan's rigid back. Spock could hear his movements, his hesitation as he moved away. He could sense Kirk's stare, but he did not turn around.

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A week passed and, with each passing day, Spock became more silent, more withdrawn. He continued to perform his duties with typical efficiency, but seldom spoke and even those crewmembers who did not know him well could sense the deepening aloofness that surrounded him like a force field.

The chess games ended. Kirk repeatedly tried to interest Spock in a match, but the Vulcan always found an excuse not to play. He began to do solitary research in his quarters at night and two days before had begun taking his meals in his room. When the captain had questioned him, Spock soberly explained that continual monitoring was needed while the computer program was in use. He launched into a detailed description of the study he had been working on, his monologue laced with an array of complex mathematical equations. After a moment, Kirk held up one hand, stopping the relentless flow of information. He knew of the project; a study requested three weeks before by a group of theoretical physicists at Starfleet Command Headquarters. It had not been of high priority and Spock had deferred it, showing a rare lack of interest. Until now.

But, mindful of the doctor's warnings, Kirk had not pushed him and had stood back, frustrated by his own helplessness, as Spock withdrew more and more into himself.

All of these thoughts ran through Kirk's mind as he walked the quiet corridors of the *Enterprise* on this, the tenth day after Spock's abrupt return. Dim lights gave the hallways a soft glow as they simulated night and the ship was quiet. If the captain could see a chronometer, it would have read 2400 hours exactly although the idea of a twenty-four hour day held no meaning in the eternal darkness through which the *Enterprise* moved.

But there was no timepiece and, in truth, the captain didn't need one. He knew what time it was. Late. Time to sleep, past time. Kirk quickened his pace, determined not to let his concern over Spock interfere with his command responsibilities. He was tired and needed rest. He would go to his quarters and sleep until 0630 hours tomorrow. And will himself not to dream.

Rounding a corridor, he saw his own door at the end of the hall. Walking forward, his steps slowed as he approached the quarters next to his own. He had never, in all these years, passed it without noticing, without looking, unless Spock walked at his side. Spock did not walk with him now. And he looked.

At that moment, a crash broke the stillness, followed by the sound of several objects hitting the floor in the Vulcan's quarters. Kirk broke into a run, nearly colliding with the door when he realized with a start that it no longer opened automatically for him. Hitting the button, he waited an endless second for it to open.

He ran inside. Save for the illuminated screen of the computer, the room was dark. He could see Spock, silhouetted in the light of the monitor, turn toward him. Kirk heard the Vulcan's ragged breathing, the sound assaulting his ears as the acrid smell of smoke filled his nostrils. Turning away, he saw the firepot, shattered into a thousand pieces, lying on the floor by Spock's bed. A yellow flame continued to burn from the tiny hearth, stretching out toward the carpet below it.



Kirk moved to the bed and slapped it out before the fire alarm signaled and brought a flood of catastrophic attention down on them. Breathing a sigh of relief, he studied the debris at his feet, aware that Spock had not moved, but continued to stand silently at the opposite end of the room. Reaching out, the captain pulled a bound stack of computer disks from the rubble. He rose to his feet and turned to face his First Officer. "What happened?"

Spock stared at the floor and Kirk could hear his breathing even out. After a moment, he looked up. "I regret that I disturbed you, Captain."

Kirk took a step forward. "You did not answer my question, Mr. Spock." The Vulcan turned away. Kirk moved immediately to his side. "Answer me. Consider that an order."

Spock took a deep breath. "I became angry. I threw the disks against the wall and shattered the firepot. I apologize for the lapse. It will not happen again."

Kirk forced himself to be dispassionate. For Spock to do such a thing was so totally out of character that the captain knew his control was reaching its final, tenuous end. "Spock," he hesitated, feeling his way, "you have to come to terms with this. You have to let your feelings out before they destroy you."

"I have no feelings. I am a Vulcan."

The same words. Kirk had heard them a thousand times, in a thousand different ways. Reaching out, he grabbed Spock by the arm. "You have . . ."

Dark Vulcan eyes glared down at him. "I have a right to my own privacy. I have not behaved irregularly while on duty." He pulled out of Kirk's grasp and moved away.

"Spock . . ." The naked appeal stopped him in his tracks. "Please, talk to me."

"I am not human. I do not need to 'talk to you.'" He clenched his fists.

"I'm trying to help you, Spock."

"Then kindly leave me in peace."

Spock stood, staring at the wall. The captain watched him for a moment, pleading silently for the Vulcan to turn back to him. When he didn't, Kirk spoke again. "I'll have to report this to Doctor McCoy. You know that."

Spock nodded without turning around. "As you wish."

Kirk stared at his back for a moment longer. Spock appeared to radiate a call for help and he swore silently that he had not pushed McCoy to order Spock to sickbay earlier. But a part of his mind knew that the doctor was right. Spock could not be forced. There wasn't a psychological test McCoy could run that Spock couldn't block if he wanted to. He had to reach out, lower his defenses, let someone in.

Kirk moved once again to the Vulcan's side and, reaching out, touched him lightly on the arm. There was no response. After a moment, he dropped his hand to his side and left the room, turning back only once at the doorway. "I'd like you to

remain in your quarters until further notice." He waited until he saw Spock slowly, imperceptibly, nod his head in acknowledgement. Then he turned and was gone.

It was only when the door was safely shut that Spock turned around. He moved gracelessly to the door and stood, his forehead resting against the hard surface, his open hand pressed against it. He closed his eyes as an involuntary shudder escaped him. Then he turned and, walking back to the demolished firepot, began to pick up the pieces, dropping them down the disposal chute one by one.



Captain James Kirk walked quickly to sickbay. The hour was late but, somehow he didn't question whether or not McCoy would be there. The door opened for him and the first thing he saw when he stepped inside was the doctor.

McCoy straightened up. "Good evening, Captain. What keeps you up so late?" He attempted a weak smile that faded when he saw the Kirk's expression. There was a familiar haunted look in his eyes that McCoy recognized at once. "What happened?"

Kirk walked to his side. "He blew up, Bones. Threw a stack of computer disks against the wall and demolished his firepot. Damn near started a fire alert. If I hadn't been right outside, the alert would have sounded and two dozen people would have been swarming all over his quarters." He gave McCoy a pleading look. "He's reaching the limit, Bones. I can feel it. This incident was the beginning. He's trying to maintain control, but he's getting to the point where he can't hold out any longer. You've got to get him down here before something happens in front of the crew. That would be the final blow, if the crew saw him lose control."

McCoy thought for a moment, although he had already decided to bring Spock down at the first overt sign of emotional distress. He had thought Spock would reach out before that plateau was reached. Apparently, he was wrong. "Is he still in his quarters?"

"Yes, as far as I know." Kirk turned toward the door.

McCoy stopped by his desk to pick up his medical tricorder. Just as he was moving away, the intercom paged him. "Recreation Room Six calling sickbay! Emergency!"

McCoy hit the switch. "McCoy here. What's wrong?"

"Ensign Peterson, Sir, he just collapsed!" The voice sounded young. It hesitated and when it spoke again, the panic had faded slightly. "This is Engineering Technician Fortari Sir. Ensign Peterson has had a stroke or something. He's unconscious, no pulse or respiration."

"All right." Two nurses who had been working in the adjacent room came in to stand in the doorway. McCoy waved a signal at them and they rapidly disappeared. "All right, Ensign, is someone resuscitating?"

"Yes, Doctor." The voice was calm now. "Mr. Arion is doing it and we have a backup."

"Good. Continue. I'll be there in thirty seconds. McCoy out." He turned to face the captain, who was already halfway out the door. "Let's go."



The pain shot through his head like a white-hot laser. Kneeling before the firepot, Spock doubled over, pressing his fists against his temples, trying vainly to block it out. But the pain would no longer be denied. The familiar emptiness that he had struggled to the limits of his strength to suppress had finally defeated him and his mind was filled with the agony of severing, the pain of death. "No . . . !" A long, agonized wail broke free as he felt his controls shatter, showering the floor around him like so much broken glass. He looked up at the ceiling and his eyes grew as black as pitch. "No! No more!" He shouted the words out into the emptiness of his quarters. Then he rose to his feet and ran from the room.



There was a knot of people standing in the corridor outside Recreation Room Six. They parted silently to admit the Kirk and McCoy. The doctor went immediately to the man lying on the floor and ran a scanner over his prone body. Several members of sickbay personnel entered and came to stand silently behind him. McCoy studied his scanner and ran it again. Then he sat back on his heels and turned sorrowful eyes on the captain. "He's dead. Massive brain hemorrhage."

Kirk looked down in silence. "But Peterson was only 22 years old," he said at last.

"A ruptured aneurism, Captain. A weakness in a portion of a vein burst. Probably congenital. An autopsy will tell us for sure, but in all probability, it would have been impossible to prevent without previous signs and symptoms." McCoy turned to look back at the childlike face of the Ensign. The expression was peaceful. Death had come so swiftly that it had no time to register on his face. He looked almost as if he were sleeping. "Damn." The doctor muttered the word under his breath.

Kirk rose to his feet and motioned for the crowd to break up. Several of those nearest the door turned to leave. Suddenly they were violently thrust away, falling to the floor in a group as Spock ran through the doorway, oblivious to their presence. His eyes were wild and focused immediately on the dead man.

"No!" He bellowed the word out and ran forward, knocking Kirk to one side as the captain reached out to stop him. Grabbing the corpse by the shoulders, Spock shook the limp body. "You will not die!"

McCoy grasped the Vulcan's arms. "It's too late, Spock. He's gone."

The Vulcan looked up at him and McCoy recoiled at the madness lurking in his eyes. "No." Spock shook his head. "He will not die. I will not let him die." Reaching out, he splayed his fingers and pressed them against the dead man's forehead.

"No!" This time it was the Kirk's shout that cut through the air. He moved forward, grabbing Spock by the arms and pulling uselessly against the Vulcan strength. "Let him go."

Spock turned to look at him. The Vulcan controls were totally gone now and there was a primal terror in his eyes, a naked fear and anguish that stilled the captain's heart. This one death was the final blow, the last obstacle that he could not overcome. "I could feel his pain, I sensed it . . . in my quarters, I could sense it." Spock was virtually incoherent. The final crumbling of his controls, so swift that it had given him no time to adjust, to compensate, devastated him. "But death will not come for him . . . not for him. I will not let him die. I will save this one life . . . this one . . . one." Spock shuddered, a powerful jolt that seemed to come from the center of his being. He turned back to the body beneath him. "I will pull you back. You will live. You will live! I will force you to live!"

"He's dead, Spock. Stop!" Kirk put every ounce of authority he possessed into the command, but the Vulcan paid him no attention and Kirk could sense his mind reaching out, initiating the fusion. And he knew with a certainty he could not explain that, if Spock, in his distraught state, succeeded in entering the empty mind of a corpse, he would go mad -- totally, permanently mad.

Reaching back, Kirk hit him hard across the face, the unexpected blow jerking his head back where it was cushioned by the captain's free hand. Spock gasped and, in his momentary confusion, Kirk pulled his hands away. "Bones!" He held Spock's wrists together, pushing them back against the Vulcan's chest. "Get Peterson out of here!"

Spock opened his eyes and turned toward the dead ensign as McCoy and the other doctors lifted his body onto a gurney. He pulled his hands free with ease and stretched them out, following the path the gurney took as it was pushed from the room. "No . . . "

Kirk caught his hands again and, this time pressed them against his own chest. He could feel his heart beating wildly beneath the tunic, the throbbing traveling up their joined fingers like minute bursts of electricity. Spock seemed to focus on it and looked up at him. "Jim . . . Jim, I couldn't save him . . . couldn't . . . so much death . . . so much suffering." The words, so long repressed, flowed out with a will of their own. "I hear them cry in my dreams." Pulling his hands free, he pressed them savagely against his ears. "I hear them cry in my dreams. The children . . . all the children." He began to sway back and forth. "The children, they cry in my dreams and I do not sleep, but still they cry . . . on the bridge, in my quarters, everywhere I hear them cry. Murderer, they call me . . . murderer . . . murderer." Spock moaned. "I . . . am . . . so . . . sorry."

He sagged forward and Kirk caught him, wrapping his arms around Spock's shoulders, feeling the unnatural thinness hidden beneath the clothes.



"I tried to find a way back." Spock turned his face into the captain's tunic and the words came out garbled. "I spent all my nights trying to find a way back. I never worked on the field density research. I spent all my time trying to find a way back."

Kirk's grip on him tightened. He had expected as much.

Spock's shoulders began to shake and, reaching up, he grasped Kirk's tunic in his hands. "But there was no way. The children . . . they called to me, begging me for help, but I couldn't." Spock shuddered and Kirk felt his tunic tear as the Vulcan clutched at him, digging his fingers into the fabric, shredding it unknowingly with the power of his own anguish. "I couldn't." A strangled sob escaped him and Kirk looked up, fearful that the other crewmembers would see Spock break down. But the room was empty. Silently, sometime during the past minute, everyone had left the room and Kirk had been too caught up in Spock's pain to notice. A silent prayer of thanks flashed through his mind.

Spock continued to clutch at his shirt and the sound it made as it tore was the only one disturbing the silence. He trembled, trying vainly to choke back the tremendous sob rising in his throat. Kirk ran one hand gently over the dark hair and tightened his hold, his eyes filled with tears. "It's all right, Spock. Don't hold it back any longer."

Spock pulled back and looked up at him. "I feared I would lose your respect if you saw my weakness."

"Grief is not a weakness, Spock," the captain soothed. At least not on Earth. He pulled the Vulcan's head down to rest on his chest again. "Oh, Spock. I could never hate you. No matter what you did, I could never hate you."

Spock seemed to shrink in his arms and Kirk could almost sense his thoughts. "You need to grieve, my friend. Don't hold it back any longer. No one is here to see, just me." Gently, he stroked the rigid back. "Just me."

And finally, after so many endless days, so much hidden pain, Spock let go. The tears began, flooding down his face, staining the captain's tunic. He cried out the depths of his agony for what seemed like hours, sobbing like a child in the captain's arms. Kirk embraced him, rocking him like a baby, knowing that this was the first time in Spock's life that anyone had held him like this. And he cried too, cried for the unknown dead on another planet, cried for Spock and the repressive Vulcan upbringing that had created the prison in which he was forced to live. But no longer, Kirk thought to himself. The plague victims they had left behind were beyond his help, but Spock was not. Never again would he let him dwell alone in that empty twilight world of his. Spock had opened up to him now and he would not permit him to pull away again. Never again.

It was nearing ship's dawn when Spock's sobbing gradually began to subside. He made a feeble effort to pull out of the captain's grasp, but Kirk's arms tightened around him. "No, no. Lie still."

"Jim, you are uncomfortable."

Kirk's legs, bent beneath him at an unnatural angle, had been numb for hours. He smiled into the dark hair. "No, Mr. Spock. I'm not."

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Commander Spock stood before his bed, trying to decide what one took on a two-week camping trip. He had no idea, really, on what to bring but somehow it did not matter. He wished to go on this trip with the captain. He sensed that it would purge him, free him from the emotional baggage he had been carrying around all of his life.

The buzzer sounded and he turned around, knowing who stood on the other side of the door. "Come."

The door slid open and Kirk walked in. He took one look at the open suitcase, the obsessively neat pile of clothes inside and smiled. "The Saroya will be here in about twenty minutes. You almost ready?"

Spock nodded. "Yes. I believe so."

Kirk gave him a quizzical look at the uncharacteristically vague reply. An ephemeral smile flashed across his face. "Such activities would be considered frivolous on Vulcan. I am at something of a loss to know what to take."

The captain laughed. "I thought you might. But, not to worry, I've packed enough for ten people; food, drink, blankets, even suntan lotion." He paused. "I've never really given it much thought before, but do Vulcan's burn in the sun?"

This time, the smile was more visible. The fact that Kirk had picked just about the hottest place on Elysium for their expedition had not escaped the Vulcan's notice. Nor had the reason for it. "Yes, Jim," he murmured. "Even Vulcans burn in the sun. On occasion."

Kirk laughed again, then turned around to search the spartan room. "Anything I can do to help?"

Spock inclined his head toward the nearest chair. "Yes. Sit."

Kirk pressed his lips together, assuming a more suitable air. Walking to the chair, he lowered himself down. "So," he said, watching Spock turn back to his packing once again. "I hear the mean temperature in Drosim is 88 degrees. One percent chance of rain. So full of wildlife that it's hard to keep from stepping on something . . ."

Abruptly, Spock turned back. He met Kirk's gaze, then focused his attention on the belt he held in on hand. "Thank you," he said, his voice very low.

Kirk leaned forward. "For what?"

The belt twisted restlessly between his fingers. Even after all they had been through, after all that had happened, he still found it most difficult to speak of his feelings.

The captain smiled gently, sensing his uneasiness, knowing the answer to his question anyway. "I didn't do any more than you would have done for me if the situation had been reversed. You don't have to thank me."

Spock raised his head. Once again, there were a thousand things he wanted to say. And once again, every one of them was lodged stubbornly in his throat. "Yes . . . I . . . "

At that moment, the buzzer rang. Spock found himself grateful for the reprieve. "Come."

The door opened. For a moment, he could not see who was standing on the other side. Then, he heard the sound of something scraping against the floor and a groan. Leonard McCoy stepped into the doorway, a large and, apparently very heavy object in his arms. "Mind if I come in?" he gasped.

Kirk rose to his feet and moved to the door, his pace increasing as the object tilted perilously to one side. Grasping it with both hands, he straightened it, somehow keeping whatever was inside from tumbling forward. "What in heavens have you got there, Bones?"

McCoy only smiled, staggering through the doorway. "A ton of bricks, if you ask me."

Aware that the doctor had avoided giving him an answer, Kirk took the hint and dropped the subject. Easing the majority of the weight into his own arms, he helped McCoy walk his mysterious bundle into the room, resting it finally on the desk.

"There." McCoy straightened, turning toward the Vulcan and smiling. "So," he said, behaving for all the world as if the three foot high package had just lapsed into invisibility. "Decided I'd come down and wish you a fond good-bye after all. You about ready to head off?"

Spock recognized a set up when he saw one. And decided, somewhat to his surprise, to play along. Turning back to his suitcase, he unnecessarily tucked in the impeccably folded clothes and shut the lid with a loud snap. "The transport will be here in sixteen minutes, eleven seconds."

Spock could almost see McCoy roll his eyes heavenward. He smiled, grateful that his back was turned and the doctor could not perceive it.

Kirk sat back down, indicating the chair at his side. "Scotty tells me that, as soon as we're gone, he's planning a week-long binge in the rec room. Dancing, wild parties. While the cat's away and all that."

McCoy chuckled. "I hear the food synthesizers are already programmed for pure Kentucky bourbon."

"And one hundred year-old Scotch."

"And enough mint juleps to float a starship."

Both men laughed. Spock turned around. McCoy looked up, his attention lingering on the package for scarcely a second. "So," he said, his expression one of pure innocence. "Aren't you just the least bit curious?"

One eyebrow rose. But his curiosity had almost gotten him killed more than once and he did not have the audacity to deny it. "Yes, Doctor," he replied with visible reluctance. "I am curious."

McCoy smiled. "No big deal, really. Just something I thought you might like. A kind of going-away present." He lifted an eyebrow of his own. "Go ahead. Open it."

Moving forward, Spock began to unwrap the package, well aware that both Kirk and the doctor were watching his face expectantly. Knowing McCoy as he did, he half-expected the whole thing to blow up in his face like an exploding cigar.

But it did not. The paper came away and the first thing he saw were the almond shaped eyes, the arched eyebrows, the almost oriental contour of the features.

His face paled. Pulling the wrapping clear, his attention flashed from top to bottom and back again. Carved of finely grained malachite, the figure fairly glowed with an inner light of its own. Satin smooth to the touch, garbed in the pagan dress of five millenniums ago, it was, quite simply, the most beautiful firepot he had ever seen.

Silence filled the room. Spock continued to stare at the figure, an expression of shock and amazement on his face. Kirk and McCoy exchanged glances. After a moment, the doctor leaned forward. "Well? Do you like it?"

"Yes." A classic human understatement. "It is quite lovely." He looked up, his eyes filled with tenderness. And more than a trace of sorrow. "Such items are very rare. Where did you get it?"

McCoy grinned. "I have a few favors out there I can call in when necessary." He made it sound easy when, in fact, it had taken hours on the comm channel and had cost a king's ransom. Time and money well spent, he thought to himself as he studied the Vulcan's awed expression.

Spock ran his fingers along the carved surfaces. "The one that I destroyed had been in our family for generations." His expression grew distant and McCoy thought for a moment that he had gone too far, had made a mistake in bringing up memories of the one that had ended its existence three days before, smashed into a thousand fragments. Spock looked over at him and this time, at last, he allowed the smile to show. "No, Doctor. You misunderstand. It's destruction was symbolic to me." He paused in thought. "The children still call to me, but I can listen to them now. I can grieve for them now. And I owe it to you. To both of you." He looked down at the firepot again. "I shall treasure this above all the things that I possess because it was a gift from you."

His eyes filled with tears. And, strangely, they did not embarrass him at all. Even in front of McCoy.

Spock glanced back up, saw that his two companions were still watching him, and managed a weak smile. "Tears," he murmured. "For the lost ones, for the pain I have caused both of you . . . for my selfishness, my foolishness."

Silence settled between them again. McCoy was the first to break it. "A Human prerogative, Mr. Spock."

The Vulcan gave him a puzzled look. He smiled gently. "Foolishness."

True enough. Spock nodded. True enough.

Suddenly, the intercom buzzed, starting all three of them with its intrusion. Kirk leaned forward and flipped the switch. "Kirk here."

Uhura's voice came back to him. "I have just received a message from the Saroya, Sir. She'll be within beaming range in twelve minutes."

"Very well. Tell them we'll be ready. Kirk out."

He cut the channel and looked up. McCoy shrugged, smiled, rose to leave. "Well, have a good time, you two and watch that sun, Spock. You're as pale as an Irishman in February. You'll get yourself one hell of a sunburn if you're not careful." He mumbled the last words over his shoulder as he neared the door.

"See you, Bones," Kirk called out after him.

"Doctor?"

The Vulcan's voice stopped him. He looked back.

"Thank you."

McCoy hesitated, seeing the open and unguarded look in those dark eyes. Spock would be the death of him yet. "Sure," he said. "Just something I picked up at a flea market on Rigel. No big thing."

"I didn't mean the firepot."

The doctor smiled. Turning, he stepped out into the hallway. Just before the door closed, he shot a quick look back into the room. "I know, Spock. I know."



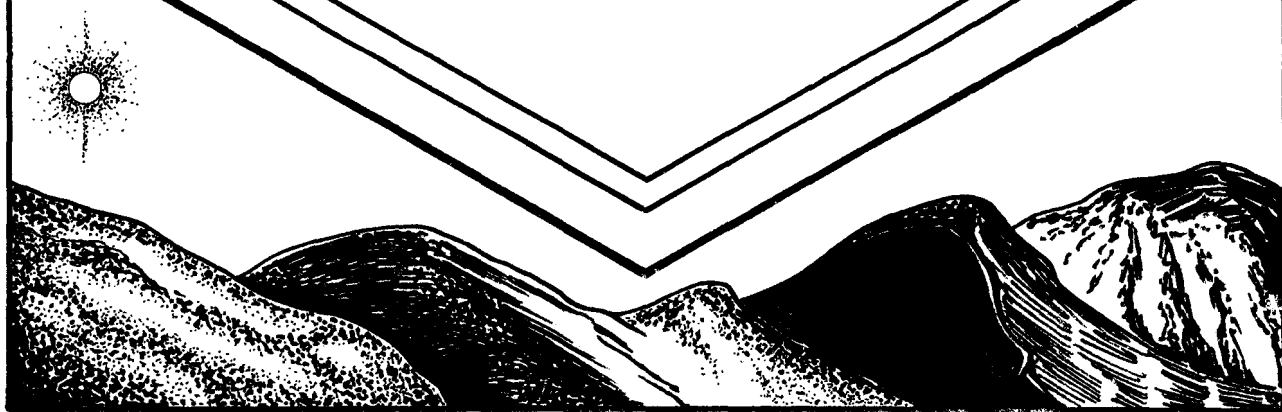
Kolinahr: the missing peace

By: Michelle Perry

Border by: Caro Hedge

I stand upon my native sand,
Emotions from my soul I've banned.
One final skyward glance I spare
As if to find my answers there.
For logic's tangled path I walk;
It's cloaked in weeds and thick green stalks
Of feelings, but the steely blade
Of reason has laid waste this glade.
Yet still I know beneath the ground
Lay roots asleep, now one soft sound
Awakens them to rise anew;
A sharing of a point of view.
It's taunting me to search elsewhere;
It mirrors me; it's soul is bare.
Not one emotion does it show.
Instinctively it seems to know
Exactly what it's searching for;
There's purest logic at its core.
And yet it has this need within,
And what I seek, it is akin.

T'Sai I've joined, my thoughts are shared,
She knows my answers lie elsewhere.



HE LIVES

By: Ginna LaCroix



Art by: Merle Decker

Spock did not have to look as he turned away from his father. Although the great hall had cleared of people, he knew Kirk would be there waiting . . . and he was. As the giant doors slid silently shut behind Sarek, Spock and Kirk walked side by side toward their own destiny.

They stepped — free men — into the warm sunshine outside Starfleet headquarters. Kirk hesitated for a moment, then looked at Spock. "You want to join the others yet?"

"Not if there is someplace else you would rather be."

"We haven't had much of a chance to talk." Kirk looked around. "Come on, let's head for the bay."

They walked in silence, finally coming to the beautifully groomed parkland and walkways that followed the shoreline of San Francisco Bay. In the middle of the day, they passed few people and were left alone by those who did recognize them.

"Captain," Kirk said softly as he watched the waves brush the shore.

"I beg your pardon?" Spock answered.

"Sorry, I was just thinking out loud." Kirk looked over at Spock and smiled self-consciously. "It does have a certain ring . . . Captain."

"It should not have happened."

"What?"

"Your demotion."

"My demo . . . Spock, surely you don't think that's why I'm . . . " Kirk reached out his hand and stopped the Vulcan. "You of all people should understand . . . 'Commanding a starship is your first, best destiny,' isn't that what you said?"

"Something like that," Spock admitted, "but advancing through the ranks denotes success, and you are . . ."

"Going backwards?" Kirk broke in with an impish grin.

Spock nodded. "Because of me."

Kirk was instantly serious. "That's the first and last time I ever want to hear you talk like that!" He said sharply. "Damn it, Spock, you gave your life for me . . ." His voice broke, his mind replaying the awful scene in engineering. He looked at the Vulcan. "Do you have any idea what it was like not being able to touch you?"

Spock shook his head. "I remember very little about what happened. I recall starting down a long, dark tunnel . . . I was alone, then I heard your voice . . . and your pain," he added softly. "Suddenly nothing was important except going to you . . . only I couldn't . . . something was in the way. . . ."

They were both silent, then Kirk turned and started walking. Spock hesitated for a moment, then followed.

"What was it like?" Kirk asked when Spock caught up.

"What?"

Kirk glanced at him. "Being dead," he said.

Spock hesitated for a moment. "I was not dead in the true sense of the word. Genesis was an unknown. . . ." He fell silent, then looked at Kirk. "Remember when we encountered Sargon and his people on Arret . . . how we hosted their minds. . . ."

"Yes," Kirk said with a shiver. "When Henoch refused to relinquish your body, we were forced to kill you."

"But no more successfully than Henoch managed to kill Sargon."

"No," Kirk admitted, but it still hurt.

A tiny smile touched Spock's lips, acknowledging what Kirk had not said, then he returned to the original subject. "Back then, our intellects were held in those globes. . . ."

"I remember," Kirk said. "Our thoughts were there, but the capability of reaching out was not."

Spock nodded. "That is how it was for me again. I had transferred that part of me into McCoy . . . a duplicate, if you will, of what I am. So, when I died, that died with me, yet the duplicate lived on."

Kirk looked at him. "I think you've been around computers for too long."

Spock smiled, but shook his head. "The transfer of the Vulcan katra was accomplished long before computers came into existence," he said in mild reproof.

"Sorry," Kirk apologized,

"To answer your question," Spock continued, accepting Kirk's apology, "I have vague memories of talking to you on the *Enterprise*, then great pain as T'Lar did the refusal." He frowned slightly. "There was a great deal of confusion after that . . . gaps in my memory. I knew facts, but not emotion . . . memories were fragmented. . . ." He paused, then turned away. "I still can't believe I did not remember the most important thing in my life. . . ."

Kirk stood rooted to the spot, not daring to breathe. Spock looked back over his shoulder, then turned to Kirk. "I did not remember what you meant to me."

Kirk nodded slowly, acknowledging Spock's words. "When I first saw you lying so still on Genesis, fire raging all around, I thought you were dead. I thought I had lost you a second time and, for a moment . . ." He paused, then shrugged.

"For a moment?" Spock questioned.

Kirk looked at him, and Spock had never seen the hazel eyes more serious. "I decided to die with you," Kirk stated. "I couldn't stand facing your death again . . . because . . ."

"Because what?" Spock prompted, knowing that it was important to keep Kirk talking. This was not something that the Human should keep bottled up inside, and Spock knew it was very unlike Kirk to talk out his feelings like this.

Kirk turned away. "Because for a second time I thought you had died without me being able to touch you. That damned Klingon commander had held me away as effectively as the transparency had done back on the *Enterprise*."

"Yet you didn't die then," Spock prompted.

"I couldn't allow myself the luxury," Kirk explained. "Duty called. McCoy would have died if we hadn't brought you back, and I had promised Sarek. . . ."

"Ah, yes," Spock said. "My father. He said he had been a little emotional in his confrontation with you."

Kirk grinned. "I hope nothing like that ever lands on my doorstep again. An angry Vulcan can be a bit overwhelming."

"He told me he forced a meld. . . ."

Kirk shook his head. "No," he said with quiet denial, "he was distraught, but not out of line." He fell silent, causing Spock to look at him sharply, alerted by the pain in Kirk's voice that the meld had not been easy. "I simply gave what he asked," Kirk went on eventually. "I gave what I could to a father who had lost a son."

Spock suspected there was a great deal more that Kirk was not saying, but sensed it was a subject best left alone. Kirk would talk about it when he was ready. "You have lost a son," he said, trying to change the subject, and immediately regretted his words as pain flooded Kirk's face. "Forgive me," he started.

"It's all right," Kirk replied. "Come on, let's find someplace a bit more deserted." He started walking quickly away. Spock hesitated for a moment, then followed him.

After some minutes they found a large rocky outcropping. Kirk jumped his way from rock to rock until he was far out over the bay. Spock followed more cautiously. He did not want to break the mood by falling into the water. Kirk both needed and wanted to talk, and Spock would do nothing to rob him of the opportunity.

Kirk was sitting on the edge of a rock when Spock finally caught up. He did not look up as Spock sat down beside him, but kept his eyes on the restless water far below their feet.

"Jim, I'm sorry," Spock tried again.

"Don't be," Kirk insisted. "It wasn't your fault. If I hadn't been so damned arrogant fifteen years ago, Khan would have been in a rehabilitation colony and none of this would have happened."

Spock looked at Kirk sharply. Trust you to find some way of placing all the blame on yourself, he thought. He looked out over the bay, taking a few minutes to think his way through his argument, then looked at Kirk. "You were more sympathetic than arrogant, Jim, and I doubt if any one person is to blame," he said with gentleness in his voice. "After all, life is not promised to us, nor is it guaranteed to be easy."

"David didn't stand a chance," Kirk countered with obvious bitterness. He looked over at the Vulcan. "My son created life, Spock. How many of us can lay claim to that?"

"Not many," Spock admitted. "I would have liked the opportunity to know him better."

"Me too," Kirk agreed. "What I saw of him I liked, after he stopped trying to kill me."

"Kill you?" Spock echoed.

"He had a bit of a temper," Kirk said with a wry smile.

"Like his father," Spock observed.

Kirk stared at the Vulcan for a minute, then looked away. "Maybe," he said. "Anyway, the Klingons had the three of you on Genesis. According to Saavik, he wasn't the one they were going for -- he just managed to get in the way."

"Again like his father," Spock said.



"Carol will never forgive me."

"Did she ever forgive you for anything before?" Spock asked mildly. "It appears to me that David inherited his mother's scientific abilities, and his father's selflessness. Not a bad combination. . . ."

"Carol said I was too selfish to give up my career so my son could have the stability his life needed; that I would take him into dangers that no man should be asked to face, so she forced me to go," Kirk said, his eyes fixed on the water below.

Spock shook his head although Kirk could not see him. "You knew you could not stay. It was her selfishness that demanded that you live your life on her terms. She would not have done it for you. In order for either of you to live, you were the one who had to leave. I do not consider that to be a selfish decision." He looked at Kirk. "In the end, she did give David to you."

"And she was right . . . it killed him. . . ." Kirk said, a trace of bitterness in his voice, but Spock could not make out whom Kirk was condemning. "But David brought you back to me," Kirk added, then his voice died away, and he took a shuddering breath. "His death hurts so badly, Spock. It's such a different pain. When I lost you, my heart was torn open . . . bleeding. With David, I feel a void, as though a part of me had died." His head dropped. "I didn't even know him . . . why does it hurt so much?"

"A part of you did die," Spock said softly. "It is not natural for a son to die before his father, however much of a stranger that son might be. And so often sons die in the battles started by their fathers." He looked over at Kirk. "Aren't you proud that, even though the moment was brief, he followed the path you had chosen?"

There was a long silence, then Kirk nodded. "Yes," he said quietly. "God help me, but I am." He put his face into his hands. "When you died, I told whatever being it is who put us here that I would give anything to get you back. . . ." He was silent for a long time. "I didn't realize then how exacting that price was to be," he breathed softly. "David wasn't the only one. . . ."

Spock nodded. "The **Enterprise**," he said.

Kirk straightened up and took a deep breath. "You gave your life to save her, and I destroyed her."

Spock looked off into the distance for a few minutes. He knew from the pain in Kirk's voice how much the death of the **Enterprise** had affected him, and he was not sure how he could phrase his feelings without adding more hurt. He finally took the plunge. "I did not give up my life for her, Jim."

Kirk looked over at him, surprise showing on his face. "She belonged to us, Spock."

A smile touched the Vulcan's lips. "I think that Starfleet would dispute that claim." He sobered quickly. "I understand what you are saying, but that is where we differ. We were facing certain death at Khan's hands, yet you had only just again

found life . . . your purpose in life. I could not let Khan take that away again so quickly." He looked at Kirk. "I did not plan to die," he said softly. "It just . . . happened."

"It is a far, far better thing that I do than I have ever done before." Kirk said quietly. "You really didn't need to carry it quite so far. I did get the message."

"I apologize for that."

Kirk smiled slightly, then pain gradually replaced it. "I stood on her bridge, Spock, watching that newly formed planet, feeling like an abandoned child. Bones questioned me, knowing how near to the edge I was, and all I could say was that I felt young." Kirk closed his eyes for a moment. "I was as alone as a child could possibly be . . . and I was terrified." He drew in a deep breath and looked out across the bay. "I took her life with no warning . . . she gave hers so that others could live." He looked at Spock. "As you had given yours, with no warning to me . . . David gave his life. . . ."

"And he didn't warn anyone." Spock interjected softly.

Kirk looked down at his hands. "No," he agreed, "I guess he didn't." He looked off across the water again. "As alone as I felt looking at Genesis, that feeling was magnified many times over as I watched the Enterprise streak to her death." He fell silent for a moment, then continued, his voice so soft that Spock had to strain to hear. "I was beyond crying at that point . . . you had already taken all my tears, and McCoy was there reminding me that I was still fighting for survival."

"As you always have," Spock said.

Kirk shook his head. "Not this time," he said. "I was beaten down . . . there was little reason to go on. I had lost everything . . . my son, my ship. . . . But then, as I watched the last of her embers fade in the sky, I remembered Saavik's words, 'He is not himself, but he lives.' Only that kept me going." He drew up his knees and rested his chin on his arms, his eyes fixed on the horizon. "He lives. Such simple words, yet they brought life back to a man who had all but given up. . . ." He was silent for a few minutes, then went on.

"That night of the refusion on Vulcan seemed almost as endless as the few minutes it took to slide down that damned glass together. Then you walked past me with no acknowledgment . . . and the child in me cried out again."

"I heard it," Spock admitted. "I did not understand at the time, but I heard." He looked at Kirk. "And during those months that followed, I kept hearing your cry. I did not recognize it for what it was, but it drew me to you . . . it took me from Vulcan with you. . . . It was not until that child cried out in anger at my lack of feeling that I finally understood." He reached out and put his hands on Kirk's arm. "I do have very strong goddamned feelings," he said softly, "for the child . . . and the man. . . ."

Kirk's eyes never left the water, but he reached up and covered Spock's warm hand with his own. "Will the pain ever end?" he asked.

Spock heard the child seeking reassurance. "No," he said softly. "but it will ease in time." He felt Kirk's hand tighten on his own. "The pain will ease," he repeated, "and life will go on for those of us who are left. . . ." His voice died away, causing Kirk to finally look over at him. "It will go on," he repeated firmly, "because the man lives."

"The man," Kirk repeated.

Spock nodded. "I do not follow the child, Captain, nor the machine. A ship runs on loyalty to one man, and nothing will ever replace it, or him."

"And what do I run on?" Kirk asked.

"Love," Spock said softly. "Freely given, and freely received. Grieve for David, Jim, because you have lost him. Remember the **Enterprise** and what she accomplished under your command, but she will not be lost forever."

Kirk stared at him. "Do you know something I don't?"

Spock shook his head. "We are due at the shuttlebay soon. Are you ready to go?"

"Did we resolve anything?"

"Did we need to?"

Kirk sighed. "I had a son any man would have been proud to call his own, and" He looked at the hand that still covered Spock's, ". . . and we still have this, forged even deeper than before." He let go and slowly got to his feet. "Let's head back. The others will be waiting."

"And James Kirk?"

"His waiting is over, Spock." Kirk said, his voice quiet. "He is free again to live, and once more he has a reason." He reached out and hugged Spock hard for a minute, then stepped back. "Thanks for being that reason."

"It goes both ways," Spock answered.

Kirk nodded. Nothing more needed to be said, and they were due elsewhere. As in times past, the needs of the many outweighed the needs of the few . . . and neither of them would have it any other way.



ON WATCHING

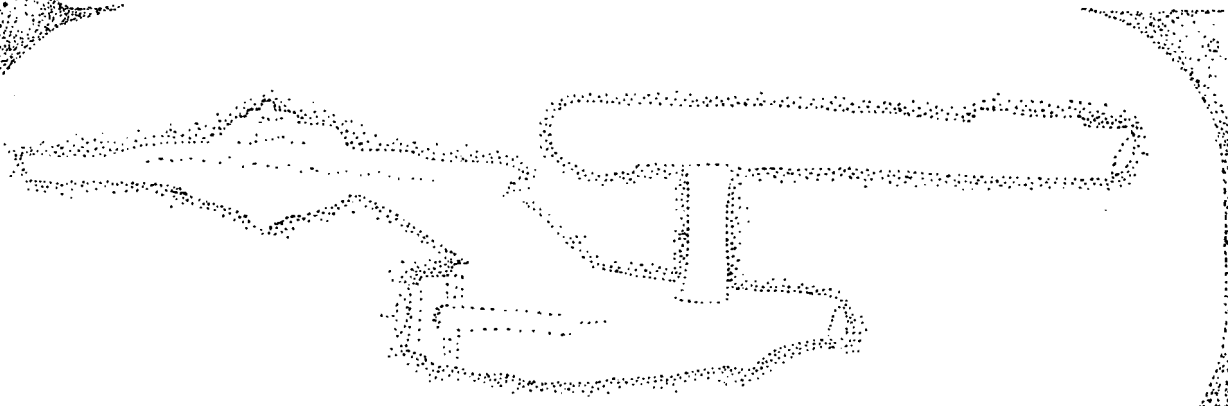
By: Yvonne Fern

When the frenzied, taxing, complex, automatic weekday ends,
And the papers, traffic, barking, problems of divorcing friends
Permeate, like troubled waters, through the all too human heart,
Star Trek's enigmatic message, like an errant cupid's dart,
Pierces gently, unobtrusive, cleansingly, and light with charm;
Draws its dreaming spell around us, limpid, drowsing, peaceful, warm.

William Shatner, Leonard Nimoy, Mr. Kelley, George Takei,
Nichols, Koenig, Jimmy Doohan stand before the starlit sky,
Disassemble, patterns fading as the epic tale unwinds;
Metamorphasise, triumphant, in the transport of our minds;
Captain James T. Kirk emerges, followed by his family-crew,
Spock beside him. Always. Ever. Proof that one is sometimes two.

Bridge lights flicker, starship lurches, signals beam from empty space.
Aliens approach the vessel, danger wears an unknown face.
Chemicals distort emotions, virus cells invade the brain,
Landing parties, trapped on planets, suffer capture, loss and pain.
Predators move into conquer. All eyes turn to Spock and Kirk,
As their separate strands of courage interlock like latticework.

Engines down, the Captain missing, Red Alert, the sickbay filled;
Transport power seems capricious, hailing frequencies are stilled.
Scotty, Bones, Uhura, Sulu, Chekov, Chapel, Kirk and Spock,
Struggle, grapple, reason, wrangle, race against a ruthless clock.
Inescapable disaster leads to Star Trek's central thought:
Speak the words that can't be spoken; fight the fight that can't be fought.



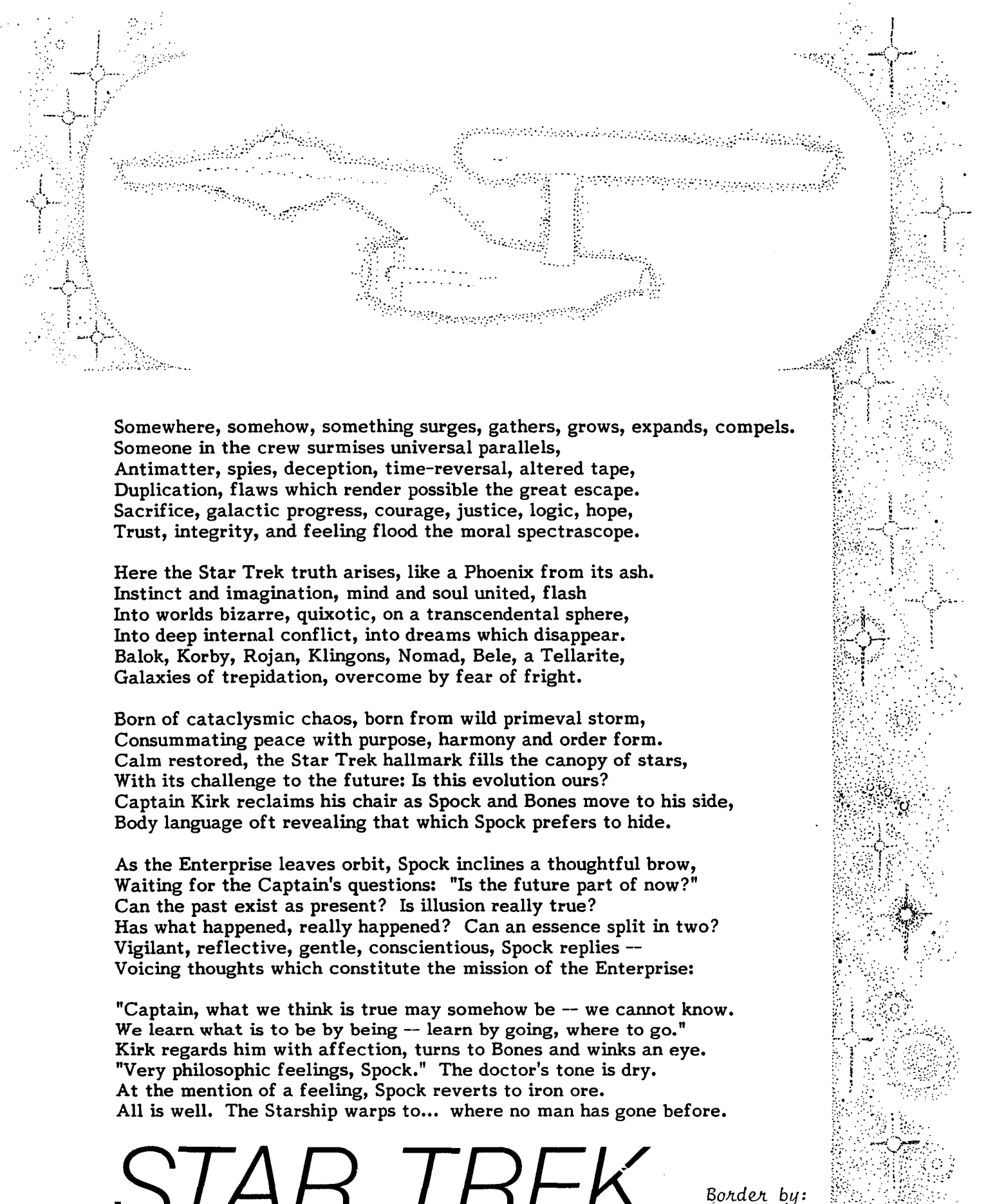
TRUTH

"For the first time in my life, I was happy."

I see the change in your eyes
And am immediately sorry for the words.
I meant no hurt, but
You are different, Captain.
You have accepted me in a way
I cannot accept myself —
As I am.
You are Human, and content to be so.
I am not like that,
I need to be Vulcan
Yet I am not — and never can be.
You try to show me I am not different,
That I have a place on this ship,
And in your life.
Perhaps,
But back there the restraints were gone,
I was no longer Spock of Vulcan,
I had no heritage to live up to,
No expectations,
No strict guidelines.
I could be different and,
By being so,
Could be the same as others.
Your emotion took that from me and
I no longer belong to your world.
The status quo was restored
And all is as it was before.
I answered your question, Captain,
But I omitted one truth.
I would rather be by your side
Than be happy.

by: Ginna LaCroix

Border by: Caro Hedge



Somewhere, somehow, something surges, gathers, grows, expands, compels.
Someone in the crew surmises universal parallels,
Antimatter, spies, deception, time-reversal, altered tape,
Duplication, flaws which render possible the great escape.
Sacrifice, galactic progress, courage, justice, logic, hope,
Trust, integrity, and feeling flood the moral spectrascope.

Here the Star Trek truth arises, like a Phoenix from its ash.
Instinct and imagination, mind and soul united, flash
Into worlds bizarre, quixotic, on a transcendental sphere,
Into deep internal conflict, into dreams which disappear.
Balok, Korby, Rojan, Klingons, Nomad, Bele, a Tellarite,
Galaxies of trepidation, overcome by fear of fright.

Born of cataclysmic chaos, born from wild primeval storm,
Consummating peace with purpose, harmony and order form.
Calm restored, the Star Trek hallmark fills the canopy of stars,
With its challenge to the future: Is this evolution ours?
Captain Kirk reclaims his chair as Spock and Bones move to his side,
Body language oft revealing that which Spock prefers to hide.

As the Enterprise leaves orbit, Spock inclines a thoughtful brow,
Waiting for the Captain's questions: "Is the future part of now?"
Can the past exist as present? Is illusion really true?
Has what happened, really happened? Can an essence split in two?
Vigilant, reflective, gentle, conscientious, Spock replies —
Voicing thoughts which constitute the mission of the Enterprise:

"Captain, what we think is true may somehow be — we cannot know.
We learn what is to be by being — learn by going, where to go."
Kirk regards him with affection, turns to Bones and winks an eye.
"Very philosophic feelings, Spock." The doctor's tone is dry.
At the mention of a feeling, Spock reverts to iron ore.
All is well. The Starship warps to... where no man has gone before.

STAR TREK

Border by:
Caro Hedge

SALT IN THE WOUND

By: Mary Volkmer
Art by: Mary Mills



Open, staring eyes looked into his; they had viewed an unknown horror. He slowly pulled the sheet over the dead man's head. He knew the answer to the question the eyes, even in death, asked. The cause of death: complete sodium chloride depletion. "Medically impossible," he had said. How comfortable those words sounded then, yet so empty. Now the cause of death seemed trivial. What about the cause of death of a piece of his own heart?

Nancy was one of the few people who had known and loved him for who he was. No pretense, no act, no excuses -- just acceptance and love. She came into his life after another loss in his life occurred -- his divorce. Nancy was a lover and a friend, a good friend. One in which you could confide without risk of rejection or ridicule. A friend like Jim. Thank God he had Jim right now, or he'd go crazy.

Suddenly, Leonard McCoy's stomach churned, the haunting vision of Nancy or "it" sponging the life from Jim. The two people he had openly cared for and trusted were grotesquely twisted into opposing images. If Spock had not come in and shattered the spell that encompassed him, Jim would be among the five bodies that lay testament to the last 48 hours. McCoy rubbed his eyes and his knotted neck muscles.

"I'd better finish dictating these final reports." He said to himself. He collected the small, flat tapes that represented the medical and personal history of the victims claimed by the latest tragedy to befall the **Enterprise**.

McCoy sat at his desk, gingerly fingering the tapes. Then, almost vehemently, he slammed the first tape into the biorecorder. "Crewman Green . . ." he began to methodically dictate the final reports.

Dr. Crater's was the most difficult. His thoughts kept straying to Nancy. Nancy! Why Nancy? What had Jim told him? Nancy died one, possibly two years ago! But she seemed so real, no "It" seemed so real. He could not help but remember the first time he saw her on that damned planet. She was so young, so beautiful, and so fresh in contrast to the abandoned, decaying ruins around her. Time had aged her gracefully, or so he had thought.

McCoy broke the thought by a fist pounding on the desk top. Crater! That damned bastard! How could he have let that thing live after what it did to Nancy. To

let it assume her form, her image. To let it touch him, live with him . . . love him. The very thought made McCoy ill. He took a swallow of coffee.

What would he have done? McCoy lowered his head to the cool desk top. What would he have done? Alone on an entire planet, without anyone but "It". Nancy dead and buried, and a bizarre chance to resurrect her. Had the creature appeared to Crater as it had to him? No, he thought. It would have been as Crater remembered her.

McCoy remembered Nancy's gentle touch and warm embrace in his quarters. Her eyes meeting his, her inviting eager lips . . . McCoy gasped as his head snapped upright in repulsion of the thought of the alien touch. It had been there with him alone, caressed him without death. Why had he been spared? Perhaps there was a part of Nancy still alive inside that thing.

His eyes squeezed shut forcing hot tears to burn a trail down his face. Perhaps her touch was not as alien as he pretended. What had she said? 'I prefer your feelings better . . . You have such strong memories of me.' Strong memories, that's what he had all right. Did those save his life?

"Stop it, McCoy!" he shouted. Trembling fingers attempted to massage his pounding temples. He felt like his head would explode. He prayed it was morning, for sleep was impossible. His quarters still held too many memories. He could still see her mouthing the words over and over. "Leonard, no . . . no . . . no!" The scenario replayed over and over. Jim's screams bouncing off the walls of his quarters. Then Nancy lay spralled at his feet after his grip on the phaser felled her. Finally, her image returned to the disfigured creature.

I can't do this to myself! he thought. I need to talk to Jim. Glancing at the clock, he sighed. Only 0400. I'll talk to him later. McCoy slowly rose and walked out of his office to the bedside of a patient. The diagnostic panel showed stable readings.

Ensign Connoly was only suffering from first and second degree burns to his hand and forearms from a leak in engineering. McCoy had encouraged Connoly to stay overnight in case of severe pain. "Hey, Doc." Connoly asked drowsily, "What's wrong? Why are you still here . . . When can I go back to my quarters? . . ."


McCoy nodded assent and handed the crewman the skin ointment, instructions and pain medication. He watched as Connoly left sickbay.

"Dr. McCoy, are you okay?" asked Nurse Jensen.

McCoy, somewhat startled, turned and replied. "Yes, Marta, I'm fine. I've just sent Connoly back to his quarters. I think he'll be okay."

"I think so too, Sir." An open smile reinforced his decision. "He was getting a little bored. Speaking of which, I will be too. He was our only patient. Why don't you get some sleep. You look like you're long over due for some." Marta suddenly blushed, realizing she had just ordered her superior. "I mean, sir, you've been here since early yesterday!"

McCoy smiled weakly. "Yea, I guess you're right. I know I need some sleep. I've been so busy with all the reports and all. Call me if business picks up." He turned and left sickbay.



McCoy walked back to his quarters, his footsteps echoing in the empty halls. He stopped in front of his door. She had stood there! "Damn," he cursed. McCoy desperately glanced at his watch. 0600!

A sigh of relief eased from his lips. Jim would probably be awake. Sometimes the captain would work out before his shift started. With a sudden burst of energy, McCoy headed for the gym. Familiar faces streamed with sweat greeted his, but not Kirk's.

The bridge, he thought and soon the lift doors parted to the familiar stage he loved to frequent. However, the captain's chair was empty as was the first officer's. His shoulders began to sag heavily. As he turned to leave, he almost ran over Uhura.

"Oops!" he said as the startled Lieutenant spilled her coffee. "Lt. Uhura. I'm so sorry!" he apologized.

"That's okay, Doctor," she said, wiping the front of her uniform and hands. "What are you doing up at this hour?" Then she glanced up, deep brown eyes warmed with concern. "Are you all right? You look terrible."

McCoy sighed. "I'm starting to get a complex around here." He said, rubbing his eyes, but his fingers also rubbed a small forest of whiskers.

A warm, small hand closed around his arm. "Have you slept at all? You look so tired." Her head lowered. "I don't know how to say this but I'm so sorry for what happened." She gazed upwards. "If there is anything . . . "

McCoy interrupted. "Thanks, Uhura." His hand covered hers. "I'm going to make it."

Hands withdrew and Uhura broke the silence. "By the way, staff meeting at 0730."

McCoy looked at his watch. "Just enough time." He grinned. Conveniently, he had a spare uniform in his office. After a quick sonic shower, a shave and a change of uniform, McCoy departed for the briefing room with renewed vigor. He took his seat after grabbing a cup of coffee. Sipping on the hot fluid, he noticed his hands were shaking. As he put the cup down, a pair of observant eyes noticed the trembling as well. A quizzical eyebrow shot up over the dark Vulcan eyes. McCoy scowled and looked away from the piercing stare. A warm, strong hand clamped down on his shoulder. McCoy looked up to find Kirk standing by him.

"How goes it, Bones?" the captain asked as he settled into the chair beside his medical officer. "I've hardly seen you in a while. You look exhausted."

"I'm okay, Jim." McCoy smiled wanly. Kirk returned a dubious smile, and briefly stared into his friend's eyes, noting that the dark circles were more pronounced than usual.

McCoy was not sure what the briefing was really about. Kirk's voice droned on as well as Spock's. The monotony of the vocal tones acted as a lullaby, until an imperative beckoning pierced its way into his subconscious.

" . . . Medical report, Dr. McCoy!"

McCoy's head jerked up, embarrassed, realizing that he had fallen asleep at the meeting. He sheepishly glanced at Kirk, who stared at him with a mixture of concern and annoyance.

"I'm sorry, Captain. What did you say?"

"Medical report." Kirk reiterated.

"Uh . . . the crewmembers died of the same cause of death -- sodium chloride depletion."

Kirk interrupted. "We were discussing the epidemic on Delta Cigma IV, Doctor. What is the medical department's status?"

"Uh . . . " McCoy closed his eyes to concentrate. "I believe we are to rendezvous with the starship . . . uh . . . *Advenger*, where we will receive additional supplies and personnel, then hopefully put a stop to the disease."

"Very good, Dr. McCoy," the captain stated. Turning to the rest, he said, "Meeting dismissed."

McCoy started to leave, but Kirk's strong hand pulled him back down into his chair. "Bones, are you sure you're all right? You've never slept through a meeting before. Did you get any sleep last night?"

McCoy looked down as he said. "Yeah, I got some."

Kirk, however, knew better. "You need to talk about it?" he asked.

"No." McCoy said, refusing to look up. His earlier need to talk to Kirk had disappeared.

"Bones, you've had a terrible shock. You haven't had any sleep, and who knows when you've eaten last. You look like death warmed over." Kirk loosened his grip on McCoy, realizing he was practically squeezing the life out of his friend's arm. A smile softened his face and smoothed the worried lines. "Why don't we go to your quarters for some of your special remedies?"

McCoy broke into soft chuckles, then in a mocked serious tone, "Jim, really, it's not even 0930 yet, and you know that I don't drink until at least ten hundred hours!"

Kirk laughed, relaxing, "Come on, I'll walk you back to your quarters." His smile quickly faded as he saw the colorless pallor of McCoy's face. "What's wrong, Bones?"

"I can't, Jim. I can't go back there, not yet." McCoy paused, then added, "She died there."

"Bones, Nancy died on that planet quite a while ago. The alien that killed her died in your quarters."

"Maybe you're right, Jim, but I can't get the real image of her out of my mind. She seemed so real." McCoy looked up at nothing, staring vacantly. "All last night I tried to convince myself that it was the alien who perished in my quarters. I couldn't."

Kirk stood up. "Come on, Bones, you need some sleep. Would you like to try my quarters? You won't be disturbed there."

McCoy started to feel a little foolish and silly. "Thanks, Jim, but I guess I really should go back to mine. I can't keep putting it off, or avoiding it."

"Well, if you should change your mind . . ."

McCoy smiled wearily, "I'll let you know, Jim."

The two friends walked out of the vacated room. Kirk continued on to the bridge as McCoy stepped off the lift. A strong band around his midsection was tightening and his legs moved hesitantly. He stopped in front of the door to his quarters, transfixed at his name on the door. Taking a deep breath, he walked inside. The automatic doors hissed eerily behind him. He had not yet straightened up his quarters from the incident. Books lay strewn about on the floor where Spock had been literally flung by the creature into the bookcase. His bed was still wrinkled and sleeping pills were scattered behind his bed. Sighing deeply, McCoy set about straightening up his living area. No matter how he tried to avoid it, he could not help but stare at the place where Nancy had died -- and Jim had almost died. Echoes of voices and screams began to rink in his ears, and shadowy images danced about his eyes. He felt nauseated and dizzy. Muscles in his neck, back and legs crying for rest were beginning to weaken. McCoy collapsed into the desk chair, the lean shoulders were quaked by silent sobs.



James Kirk was sitting in his quarters, relaxing. Someone signalled to enter. "Come," he said.

Spock entered the room and remained standing. "Excuse me, Captain, may I have a word with you?"

"Yes, Spock, what seems to be the problem?"

"As you stated the other day, the buffalo."

Kirk looked puzzled, "What about them, Spock?"

"I am still learning many facets of human behavior. One of them is the preoccupation with an event to the point of emotional and physical collapse."

Kirk did not need to inquire further. "Bones. He worries me too, Mr. Spock." Kirk looked up at his first officer. A twinkle touched his eye. "He's more illogical and emotional than usual, I know."

"Seriously, Captain. His physical appearance and his behavior in the briefing room indicate a very serious emotional state. It is quite obvious since the incident of the creature's death that the doctor has had little rest."

Kirk shifted his weight to a more comfortable position in his chair. "Dr. McCoy has had quite a blow. People react in different ways, especially Bones."

"Jim," Spock persisted, "I have not known the doctor long enough to understand or recognize his normal spectrum of behavior. However, his actions following the creature's death is out of character, even for McCoy. I may be wrong, but I believe delay in recognition of the alien is the driving force in the overwhelming guilt the doctor has apparently submerged himself in."

Kirk sighed. "I think Bones still loved Nancy. From the way he talked about her before we arrived on M-113, and judging from his reaction when he saw her on the planet, as well as from his attempts to protect her from me in his quarters; I would say that his emotional bond with Nancy was still strong. Even after the briefing this morning, McCoy stated that he felt it was Nancy and not the creature who died in his quarters." Kirk paused. "Poor Bones. It must be ripping him apart over the fact that it was he who pulled the trigger. I can still see his face when he saw Nancy on the floor, or 'It' rather. He probably believes that in some way he committed murder, and I guess to his memories of Nancy, he did." Kirk shifted in his seat. "However, McCoy did delay in realizing that Nancy was indeed an alien. Though he acted swiftly when the creature attacked me the second time, you may be correct in your assumption of his guilt feelings. McCoy must be going through hell right now, and his appearance this morning reflected some of the torment he's been experiencing. I'd better go by and check on him. What time is it, Spock?"

"Sixteen hundred hours and twenty-two minutes, sir."

Kirk patted Spock's arm, "Thanks for your concern, Spock, and I know I speak for McCoy also." Spock nodded wordlessly.



Sleep seemed impossible for McCoy. When he lay on his bed, he would wake up after only a few minutes, his skin tingling from a ghostly touch. His mind kept replaying the moment that he was drugged and gently stroked to sleep by Nancy's hand. How long had he laid there while she/it was beside him, caressing him?

Numerous times he had stumbled over to his desk, refilling his empty glass with bourbon. Each glass, he prayed, was filled with forgetfulness, but each emptied glass gave his memories and dreams twisted and distorted dimensions. A horrible thought emerged from the depths of his mind. The alien, what if it were part Nancy? Had he killed a part of Nancy also?

The autopsy of the alien revealed no further transformations, internally or externally. The body was kept in a separate room, away from its victims. The alien blood, organs, tissues, or other body fluids did not hold any traces of its victims either.

A troublesome nightmare kept surfacing. No matter how he tried to change the events, the dream continued on its macabre course. McCoy was down in pathology, behind him lay the five corpses. Slowly he walked into the adjacent room. On the cold, hard slab lay a sheet wrapped form, almost glowing in the stark light. The form had a familiarity to it. McCoy stepped nearer, hesitating. Then from beneath the sheet a hand drops, a small, delicate hand. Fear grips and holds him, but he continues closer to the hidden form. Shaking hands take hold of the sheet and slowly peel it back. Nancy! Beautiful Nancy as she was years ago. Remnants of tears were on her cheeks below the dark lashes. Gently McCoy wipes one cheek. Suddenly eyes opened, locking into his. A cold hand grabs his wrist, and a raspy voice squeaks from the dry mouth.

"No, Leonard . . . No . . . Why, Leonard?"



McCoy awoke suddenly, realizing that he had fallen asleep at his desk. His heart was hammering violently in his chest, and his respirations were harsh and rapid, burning in his throat. He had to get out of here, there were too many memories in his quarters.


Wearily he trudged out of his cabin and headed for the safety and security of his office. He was protected there. The lift doors were his goal down the hallway. He concentrated on them as he made his way down the seemingly longer corridor. So intense was his concentration that he did not notice Sulu or Rand -- nor did he notice that one of them had accompanied him onto the elevator. Closing his eyes, he focused all of his energy on reaching his final destination. The lift doors finally opened, the hallway to sickbay wavered and tilted. The effects of the alcohol and lack of sleep were claiming him. Everything was distorted. Reaching his office, he breathed a sigh of relief. He had made his destination, he was safe. Lowering himself into his desk chair, he noticed the biotapes of the victims on his desk. Angrily he knocked them across the desk and watched them scatter onto the floor. One of the discarded tapes could be Jim's! "Someone help me," he mourned as he buried his head in his arms, "Make the ghosts go away!"

A noise made him raise his head. Janice Rand was gathering the scattered tapes from the floor. Carefully placing them on the far corner of his desk, she looked at him sympathetically. "Can I get you something? You look like you could use some coffee, or even some supper." She said, stepping closer. "I'm sorry for what happened, it must be very painful for you." Her blue eyes were honest and appealing.

Abruptly he wiped his eyes, his voice was coarse from the alcohol and weakness. "No, Janice, I don't need anything right now. I need to be alone."

Rand stepped a little closer, "Sometimes it helps to talk about it. You loved her very much, didn't you?"

McCoy stared past her, his eyes wide and intense. Tears welled in his eyes. "Oh yes, she was one of the most warmest, kindest, and feeling women I've ever known. It's funny how you take advantage of those people in your life. She strengthened me after my divorce, rebuilt my faith in love and taught me how to love again." He looked down



at his hands, "I don't know if I took too much or gave too little, but our relationship began to thin. I became immersed in my work . . . Nancy met Crater . . . But I still loved her . . . Now this!" His head fell forward again.

Her hand rested on his shoulder. "Let me know if you need anything, sir. I'll be on the bridge." After she gently stroked the back of his dark, fine hair, she left his side silently. The pneumatic doors whispered her departure.



McCoy did not know how long he had slept, or what had wakened him. Wearily he stretched and stumbled out of the office into the main room. No patients or staff. A slight stirring in the pathology area caught his attention.

Upon entering the pathology lab, only five sheet-wrapped bodies lay undisturbed before him. The air was still. Before he turned to leave, a soft rustling was heard from the adjacent room -- where the creature's body's lay. McCoy cautiously made his way to the room. It was probably just a crewmember curious about the alien, or one of his staff. Angrily he stormed into the room, his face flushed with building rage.

"Who in the blazes is in here? . . . " He stopped, his verbal barrage was ended in a gasp. The table slap was empty; no alien, no body -- just the sheet that had draped the corpse. His eyes rapidly scanned the room -- empty.

Aware that he was hyperventilating, McCoy consciously slowed his breathing. His mouth was dry and swallowing was difficult. Where was the body? Had someone taken it? That was very unlikely. Was it in cold storage? That's probably where it was, all toxicology, tissue slides, and tests had been performed.

"Damn, McCoy, you're slippin', boy!" Nervously he rubbed his chin. What if the body were missing? He had to tell Kirk. How does one explain the disappearance of a body? Rarely did his staff remove a body before he had given the order to do so, or had he? McCoy was beginning to doubt his own sanity. McCoy spun on his heels, and before he could move any further an uncontrollable scream burst from his throat. Standing in the doorway was Nancy! His heart pounded loudly in his ears, the room began to spin. McCoy had never fainted in his life, but as his vision field began to narrow, a fine film of sweat coated his dry skin, and the engulfing numbness informed him that the first time was imminent. Nancy had a sweet, almost sick smile on her face. She stepped forward. McCoy started backing up.

"Go away!" he screamed.

"Leonard, don't be afraid. It's Nancy, remember?" She said, continuing her slow, steady stalk toward him.

"Go away, you're not Nancy. You killed Nancy years ago. This damned charade has got to stop. You're responsible for the deaths of four of our crew and Dr. Crater." The vehemence in his tone did not deter her advances.

Nancy was now inches away from him, looking up at him pleadingly.

"Stop looking at me that way!" McCoy yelled, "I thought I killed you . . . I thought you were dead . . . I mean you were dead . . . How can you be here after the autopsy . . . " McCoy could not finish. He stood looking down into her face breathlessly.

She reached up a hand to his face, he quickly grabbed her wrist. "No, don't touch me!" He commanded hoarsely, but the wrist was small, soft and warm in his grasp.

"Leonard, my darling, I won't hurt you. I love you, and I know that you still love me." Her other hand was caressing his face gently, rhythmically, and soothingly. McCoy could feel his tired muscles relaxing, and his grip on her wrist was releasing. "You could never kill me. You love me. Your love has kept me alive, renewed. My poor dear, this must be so traumatic for you." She said softly and hypnotically. Her hands were warm, not cold; her eyes were soft and moist. Her eyes . . .

"I need you, and I want you. It's been so long." Nancy's words were soft, her mouth enticing. McCoy found himself holding her in his arms. She was soft in his arms, and real. McCoy could not discount the fact that she was here, but he knew it was not Nancy. He had seen far more bizarre alien life in his time. Tissue regeneration was not that uncommon in other life forms. He had been cheated time with Nancy, cheated a chance to say "good-bye", and a chance to love back.

He bent down to kiss her lips, the kiss was tender and sweet. His resistance was melting, his doubts were fading. Gentle hands were stroking his face as he looked into her brown eyes. "Nancy, you are so beautiful. I've missed you so much." McCoy's fingers lightly brushed her dark hair from her forehead.

"Leonard, we have all the time in the world now. But this is no place for us. Let's go to where we can be alone, undisturbed." Her finger traced the natural pout of McCoy's lower lip. Now that my husband's gone I'm all yours." An encircled hand behind his neck drew his head forward to hers. Intoxicated from the kiss, McCoy felt weak and disoriented. Time was distorted, his movements slow, his memory was patchy.


He had fallen asleep on his bed, Nancy was cradled in his arms. McCoy was not aware of what had happened. He kissed the top of her head and held her closer. She stirred sleepily in his embrace. Stretching she pulled away from him. Smiling at him, she stroked his forehead. "Feel better, darling?"

McCoy returned her smile, "I guess so. I fell asleep, didn't I?" he asked embarrassed.

"Yes, but you were so tired. You never did take care of yourself."

McCoy laughed, then seriously looked up into her face. "I can't believe you are here. I can't believe that this is real."

Nancy bent forward and kissed his mouth, gentle fingers combed through his hair. McCoy closed his eyes, his arms encircled her securely. The nimble fingers traced the curve of his jaw, onto his neck and shoulders; while she continued to inebriate him with insistent passion. Nancy's hands continued out onto his arms, lightly breaking the embrace around her. McCoy was vaguely aware that Nancy's touch,



though certain, was becoming stronger and faintly colder. Her fingers interlaced with his, then pulled away encircling his wrists. The once delicate touch was now crushing in its intensity. With a gasp of pain, McCoy's eyes opened and beheld a horror he had never imagined. He looked into sunken, receded eyes; an almost nonexistent nose, and teeth pierced through a grotesque, gaping mouth.

"No!" McCoy screamed, as he struggled against its grip, but he was no match for the creature's strength.

"Don't struggle so, Leonard." Nancy's voice ebbed from the monstrous mouth. Remembering the hypnotic trance the thing could inflict, McCoy squeezed his eyes shut. Continuing in his futile attempt to break free of the painful grip around his wrists, sweat poured profusely from his forehead and skin. His mouth was dry, his breaths coming in painful gasps.

"Relax, Leonard, you're sweating so." The creature said drawing his arms together and locking both of McCoy's wrists into one single large hand. The other appendage spread and seized his face. "Open your eyes and look at Nancy, darling." McCoy tried to turn his head away from the draining touch, but no matter which way he turned his head the grotesque hand still found contact with his face and neck.

"Stop it!" he shouted through closed eyes. "Leave me alone!" Then with a deep breath, he yelled with all his remaining strength. "Jim, help me! Jim help me!" He knew that his cry for help would never reach the captain's ears but it was his last hope. He started sobbing as the greedy contact was absorbing his strength, his life. Weakness and hopelessness were engulfing him, struggling against the alien was in vain. His muscles ached, weary from the struggle. A darkness was flooding his mind, and his consciousness was fading. He vaguely heard the doors to his cabin open. Kirk's voice cut through the thickening void.

"Bones, what is it? Bones, wake up!"

The creature stopped its attack on McCoy and rose off the bed, pulling McCoy with it in its pursuit. Kirk looked horrified, and was speechless. He ran to McCoy's side. "McCoy, fight it! Come on, man, wake up!!" Suddenly, the alien swung out catching Kirk off guard. The startled human was sent flying into the bedside console. Kirk lay motionless, blood oozed from a cut on his left temple. The creature started toward the unconscious form. McCoy could not let the creature be successful this time.

"No, stop! Don't touch him!" McCoy screeched. The thing stopped and slowly turned toward him. Bending down the creature effortlessly picked up McCoy in a trapped embrace, then released him on the bed. Hands clamped around his face, McCoy desperately grabbed at the wrists, trying to pry the creature's contact off his face. Then the strong hands grabbed him by the shoulders shaking him. He could hear Kirk call out.

"Bones, dammit, wake up! . . . Wake up!" Kirk's voice echoed through his mind, reverberating in the corridors of his subconscious. The intensity building, washing over his brain like a strong tide. His strength was returning, but the creature still had a firm hold on him. McCoy fought back.



Then a powerful grip on his wrist and a slap across his face shattered the hideous scene.

His eyes flickered open, and a concerned, worried face came into focus.

"Jim, you're okay!" McCoy said breathlessly. Then bolting up, he scanned the room, "The creature . . ." His words were barely audible.

"Relax, Bones." Kirk said pushing McCoy back onto the couch. "There's no creature here." Reality was setting in. He was still in his office, it had all been a dream . . . no a nightmare. The captain was sitting beside him on the couch. Kirk looked into his friend's pale face.

"You had me scared sick, Bones. Thank goodness Sulu and Rand saw you, said that you appeared rather ill. I came to check on you and heard you yelling for help. Then I found you on the floor by your desk, unconscious."

McCoy looked weakly up at Kirk, then past his shoulder and saw Sulu and Spock. A hand from behind brushed back sweat-soaked hair, and a cool cloth rested comfortably on his forehead. Janice Rand came around into view. She whispered softly, "You're going to be all right, sir." Embarrassed, McCoy closed his eyes, his pale cheeks reddened.

"Okay people, let's clear out a bit." Kirk stated, knowing his friend was uncomfortable. After the others quietly left, Kirk turned to McCoy. "How goes it, Bones?"

McCoy removed the cloth from his forehead. "Better, Jim, thanks. Damn, what a nightmare, it seemed so real."

Kirk looked hesitantly before he proceeded. "Was it about Nancy?"

"Yes it was. It was awful!"

"Bones, I know this has been very hard for you, but Nancy is dead. She was dead long before we set foot on that planet. You did not kill Nancy. You killed the alien."

"We've been through this before, Jim." McCoy said, rising up on one elbow.

"I think that we need to go over it again. The events obviously are still upsetting you. Bones, you should look at yourself. You look awful." Kirk stopped. The pale pallor had returned to his friend's face. "Even Spock is worried about you." Kirk placed his hand on McCoy's shoulder. "I'm very concerned about you, Bones. You can't continue on like this. You need rest." Kirk stood up as McCoy swung his legs over the side of the couch. "Come on, let's go to your quarters for some of your best medicine."

McCoy smiled. Spock walked into the office. "Proceeding on the new course as ordered, sir. We should arrive at Delta Cigma IV in approximately 16.8 hours." Spock glanced over at McCoy. "I trust you are better, Doctor?"

"Yes, Spock, I am. Thank you, for your concern." McCoy stated, expressing more with his eyes than his spoken tone.

Turning to Kirk, Spock interrupted. "I need to have a word with you, Sir." Spock's hands were folded behind his back. Kirk shrugged his shoulders at McCoy and walked out of the office.

Relieved by the privacy, McCoy cradled his head in his hands. The captain was right, he could not continue on like this. Nancy was gone. He had to finally accept this and say 'good-bye'. As usual, he had his career, and better yet he had his friends to help him cope. He felt so tired, so old, and so empty.

Kirk returned to the office. "Come on, Bones. Let's go get you some supper." Kirk said, slipping a supportive hand underneath his friend's arm and assisting him to a standing position. The arm in his hold was trembling.



After dinner, McCoy and Kirk headed for the doctor's quarters. McCoy stepped hesitantly into his cabin, but it was different. The mood had changed, and the ghost was gone. It was though nothing had ever happened. Kirk stepped in around McCoy. McCoy smiled reassuringly.

"What can I get for you, Jim?"

"Bones, sit down. I'm buying."

McCoy laughed and plopped down in his desk chair. "You are, are you? Well, the bar is that way." He said, pointing to the bookcase.

"What can I get for you, Bones?"

"Oh, the usual, Jim." McCoy said as he propped his feet up on his desk and leaned back into his chair. Kirk returned with two glasses, handing one to McCoy, he toasted, "Here's to life."

Pulling his feet off the desk, McCoy sat forward, "No, here's to friendship. Thanks, Jim."

Glasses clicked and the drinks were downed. The two friends sat in silence. Jim looked up from his glass. "Can I get you a refill?"


"No thanks, Jim." McCoy said comfortably. A drowsy warmth was washing over him and his eyelids were getting heavy.

"Are you getting sleepy?" Kirk asked.

"Yeh, a bit."

"Maybe you had better lie down."

"No, I'm fine." McCoy ended in a wide yawn. His thin form was beginning to mold into the angles of the desk chair as his muscles relaxed.



"Bones, I've got a confession to make. You had the universe-famous Jim Kirk Cocktail. Guaranteed to make you sleep for a good, long while."

The drowsy eyelids shot open. "You mean my drink was spiked?!!" The legs shot off of the desk, and McCoy leaned forward, "Jim, that's unethical!"

"Bones, you've pulled that 'unethical' stunt on me more times than I can count."

"That's different, I'm a doctor, you're not."

"I had a doctor's order for that."

"Yeh, whose?" Dr. McCoy asked as eyebrows rose.

"Dr. Kirk's." Kirk said, repressing a smile.

Gentle laughter shook McCoy's shoulders. "Yes, sir." Then the open eyelids dropped halfmast.

"Come on, Bones. Let me help you to bed. You're going to fall off of that chair any minute." McCoy slowly stood up and tottered over to the bed. Kirk gently pushed the physician's shoulders back onto the bed, then eased his boots off. Kirk stood up quietly, McCoy was already asleep. The lines of his face had smoothed out, leaving an almost boyish-like expression. No traces of the nightmare touched the sleeping doctor's countenance. Kirk walked over to the closet and pulled out an old family quilt of McCoy's, and draped it over the slumbering form. McCoy sighed and pulled the quilt up over his shoulders and curled into a snug ball.

The doors to the doctor's quarters opened behind Kirk. He turned to face his first officer.

"I trust all is well, Captain?"

"I hope so, Spock, at least he's sleeping. I think your suggestion of a sedative was a wise one. I think that everything will be okay, but I'll stay here for a while until I'm sure. Anything to report?"

"No, sir. Just let me know if I can be of assistance."

"You already have been. Thanks, Spock." Kirk smiled softly.

Spock bowed slightly and left the room. Impervious to the conversation around him, McCoy snuggled into the envelopment of the comforter and drifted off into the best night's sleep he had known in a long time.



THE BALANCED SCALE

By: Ellen Morris

Border by: Shellie
Whild

Have I been jealous?
Tough question.
Two answers.

Very jealous.
From the beginning
your warmth,
intelligence and humor
promised a rare friendship.

-- But the practical problems demanded logic:
a high, silent song to cleanse the crew of paradise
-- And the intimate moments were revealed to another:
a yearning cry for a beach to walk on.
-- And the worst pain couldn't be assuaged by these hands:
a love for one not quite human.
So much sharing that we've not had.

My second answer is

jealous not at all!
For I know the places in your heart
saved specially for me.
We are confidantes of a different kind
in the way we've laughed and cried
and fought together,
teased emotion bridled by logic,
and beaten the odds when death was the only answer.

Too much between us is ours alone
for me to fear your closeness with him.
We share a separate brotherhood
-- the kinship of loneliness --
-- the ties of our humanity --
binding us in other ways.

I have been jealous
but I have also been privileged
and so the answer
is yes and no
-- a kind of balanced scale --
for all that he has had
I've had as well
in individual measure.

You ask tough questions.



REMNANTS

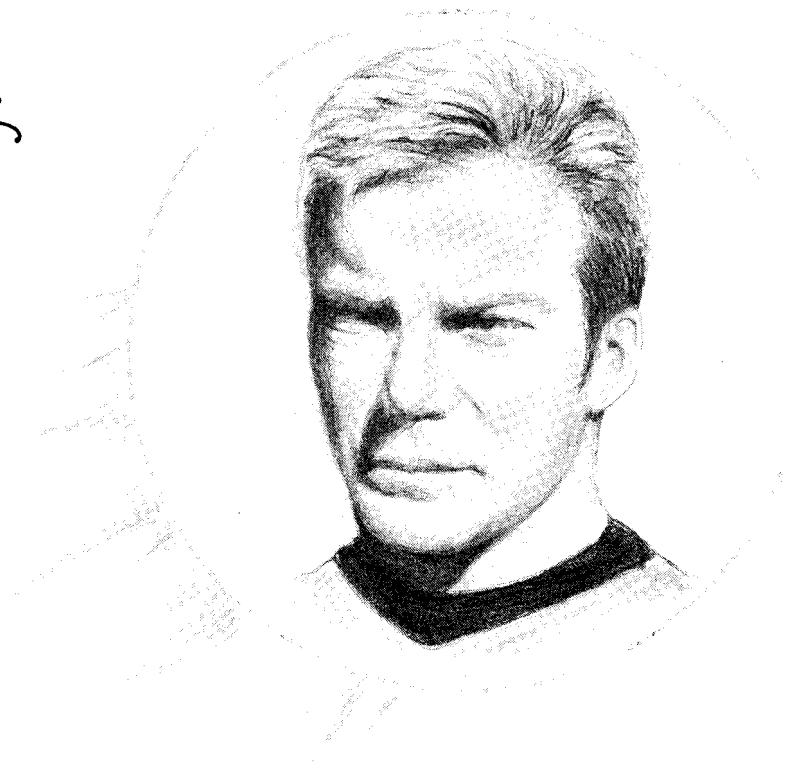
By: Betsy Fisher

Art by: Caren Parnes

At night I sit in silence softly bathed in crimson glow,
Steeped in meditation while the shadows ebb and flow.
I kneel beside the firepot and bow my head in shame.
Another watch has ended and I've played the humans' game.
On the bridge I've done my duty, senses locked in Vulcan pride,
Aloof. Apart from others, grasping logic. Justified.
Behind me at the conn the captain sits in calm repose.
His soft voice reassures the helmsman: "Steady as she goes."
I steel myself to hide a truth I cannot quite disguise
Each time I hear this human's words or meet his laughing eyes.
I stiffen at my station as the effort takes its toll
And I wish to flee belowdecks to regain my breached control.
Ship's dawn, once more resume the mask to greet another day.
One more Vulcan compromise and one more price to pay.
I can't deny my heritage, control must be complete.
To lose this constant vigilance would spell my soul's defeat.
My heart decries the solitude, I dare not let it show.
I serve with solemn dignity and others never know.
Another watch is ended and again night comes around.
I escape alone to meditate on logic's hallowed ground.
Still I feel a surge within, defying logic's chains,
And in its throes I weaken 'til I'm unsure what remains.
Tradition banks the inner fire, but only for awhile.
Emotion fills my mind with guilt I cannot reconcile.
Again I kneel in darkness just as countless nights before,
But the heart within me quickens at the knock upon my door.
I rise with limbs atremble to palm the latch release
And clasp my hands in fierce control, but tremors will not cease.
Before me stands the captain with that very "human" grin.
I shudder as he asks me: "Mr. Spock, may I come in?"
What can I say? I bow him through, he steps beyond my door.
I find a spot of interest to study on the floor.
"I've watched you at your post," he says, "I hope there's nothing wrong.
I'm new, you see, to captaincy, and trying to belong.
If ever I offend you, or hurt in any way,
I expect you to correct me ... at once, without delay."

I lift my eyes to look at him, perhaps I comprehend.
I may not be the only one alone, without a friend.
In formal stance I contemplate, hands clenched behind my back.
Perhaps his charm might compensate for all the skills I lack.
The surge I felt within my mind is testing me again.
We both begin to realize we're not like other men.
My logic falters further and my shoulders turn to wood.
I life my head and meet his gaze. "Yes, Captain, understood."
I see a sparkle light his eyes; he turns back to the door.
His first request to number one ... and maybe something more?
I watch the spot where he had stood with hope I can't suppress
And know somehow I've found a haven from this loneliness.
Tonight I sit in silent joy, awash in crimson glow,
Holding back emotion which I still dare not let show.
It seems I've made a pact tonight with the man at the conn above,
Opening a path I've longed to tread ... of friendship, trust and love.
Ah tradition ... which is worse?
 Needing him?
 Or denying vague remnants of logic's curse?

Art by: Caren Parnes 



CHANGE OF PROCEDURE

by: Sara Hale

Art by: Laurie Huff

Spock had little time in which to return the alternates to their own universe. Their time, as well as his, was running out. Questions formed double rows in his mind, eager for answers; however Spock ignored the pressure and held firm behind the transporter console. He would see these strangers back to their own world, himself.

The images, sensations and knowledge he had absorbed from the physician's compassionate mind had given him reason to pause. The Doctor had almost been left behind. And, of all the alternates, he was least equipped for survival here.

The alternate Captain Kirk's insistence that change was needed -- and possible -- was still echoing through his mind. The logic could not be denied, nor the man's sincerity.

Spock watched closely as the alternates took their places on the transporter pad, knowing they were trusting him to return them safely to their home. The Vulcan's hands were steady, though he felt a great inner tension. He knew a switch would have to be made before his own captain would be safely returned to him. Because this phenomenon had never occurred before, Spock had no real faith in its smooth transition. Nevertheless, his hands went through the necessary motions.

He had told the alternate captain -- apparently a more reasonable man than his own captain -- that he would consider his argument. The alternate had told him of a device in the captain's cabin that would insure him safety and power. He would have to get to it before his captain was returned. The procedure would be dangerous and delicate, but Spock was certain once his captain's and officer's molecules had been captured they could be safely suspended until he was ready to materialize them.

Spock watched the alternates shimmer back to their own universe, then slowly drew in his own captain, and officers. As they began to form on the pad, Spock changed direction, pulling them into suspension within the transporter mechanism.

He turned to the technician next to him. "Guard the controls. Absolutely no one but myself is to touch them until I return. Understood?"

"Understood, Sir."

Spock headed for the captain's cabin, Marlena by his side. "You must promise me you won't kill him." She pleaded.

Spock continued to walk, not looking at her. "I have no intention of killing the captain; however, I also have no desire of allowing him the opportunity to kill me. I do not intend to disappear as so many have."

"I really think you're the only person who is safe, Commander Spock. He watched you constantly, and therefore, could have made you disappear as many times."

Spock had long ago bypassed the security lock on the captain's door. He entered without difficulty and allowed Marlena to show him the Tantalus device. Though he had not responded to her explanation, it did surprise him. A plan began to form in the Vulcan's complex mind.

"And here it is. This is the focusing dial . . . close up or wide angle view," Marlena demonstrated. "This is the button that kills, touch it and the one you have focussed on . . . disappears . . . forever."

Spock nodded in acknowledgement. He then went to work.

Very little time had passed before the Vulcan had tricordered the device and analyzed it enough to change the setting on the "kill" button. He also made a duplicate, although a killing-capable one, for himself.

Spock then returned to the transporter room. Marlena had not been present when Spock effected the changes, so she would be unable to warn the captain.

Spock stood at the console and pulled the forms from the suspension field as though they were just now beaming in. They would not know the difference.

When the forms had materialized on the platform, they looked carefully around them, then to Spock. Kirk noted the beard and uniform and grinned. "It's good to be back! Spock, you wouldn't believe the crazy universe we stepped into."

"Captain, you are back in time to deal with the Halkans. Your . . . counterparts were . . . most interesting."

Spock had already summoned the captain's personal guards. They entered the transporter room at that moment and proceeded to position themselves around the captain. Spock's brow eased upward a fraction in response to the captain's appreciative nod. "As efficient as ever, Mr. Spock."

Spock nodded in reply, his arms crossed in front of him. "Captain, once the matter of the Halkans is resolved, I should be interested in your reactions to . . . the others."

Kirk looked around him, not wanting to allow too many people to hear of the strange event. "Yes, and I'd be interested in telling you, Mr. Spock; but first, the Halkans. Status report."

On their way to the bridge, Spock informed the captain of the alternate's stalling, and of the Empire's reaction to it -- namely, that he should see to it that the captain "dealt" with the Halkans, or "forcibly" remove and replace the captain. The three entered the bridge, and Kirk settled arrogantly in the command chair. Uhura patched in a link to the Halkans.



McCoy had just finished putting sickbay back together from whatever had happened. He paused to think about what had occurred. He was still deeply disturbed by what had happened; by what he had seen and felt. Always a very intuitive man, he had felt the reason-directed actions of the other crew and officers, felt the compassion, the control, and yet, he had not really seen any weakness. That fact encouraged him; but at the same time depressed him because of what he would now miss.

The alternate Spock, very much like his own, was a man much more at peace with his environment than Spock of the *ISS Enterprise*. He wondered what had occurred in the alternate's history to have redirected those savage Vulcan emotions, or if Vulcans were simply very different in their universe.

McCoy had expected the Vulcan to interrogate them all by simply forcing a mind meld on them, but he had not done that, had never even mentioned it, and the doctor wondered if that mirror Spock was capable of mind melding. Surely, he thought, if he were, he'd have used it on them . . . but then, McCoy reminded himself, no form of forced interrogation had been used. He had a lot to consider -- about their world, and his own.



Captain Kirk had imperiously informed the Halkans that the time extension was being withdrawn. They were to submit to the Empire's demands or be destroyed. The Halkans had repeated their former reply, and Kirk ordered their complete destruction without a moment's hesitation.

The communication stating that Kirk had annihilated the Halkans -- and was sending along visual proof -- was sent immediately.

The captain smugly tilted his head, staring at the scene of destruction on the forward viewer, then turned to catch the Vulcan's eye. Kirk was no longer in the weaker position. He had done his duty to the Empire, and now reaffirmed his position and status.

Spock had also informed the captain of Sulu's attempt on his mirror's life, and of Chekov's attempt to take his own place in the line of command. Kirk had expected as much from the crew; in fact, would have been surprised had these things not occurred. Still, he would keep close watch on both men and all associated with them. Why the mirror captain had not taken their lives was a mystery to Kirk. Chekov was still in sickbay under guard and Sulu was in the brig. Kirk wanted them back on the bridge because he knew they were experts at their jobs and he intended to keep the **Enterprise** on the Empire's list of The Best.

Kirk sat, thinking about the mirror Spock. The man carried no visible weapons, and his aloofness to threats and bribes conveyed a sense of superiority. The fact that he wore an unimpressive and rather casual uniform, and was without facial hair, made Kirk think of him as younger and less forbidding. However, he realized this Spock was the mirror to his own. He turned again to study the Vulcan's back. Kirk let his eyes drop to the dagger a moment, then the agonizer. Mirror Spock had no such weapons. How does he remain safe from attack?

The captain did not like admitting it, but he had taken the mirror Spock on his word, had actually expected him to do what he stated . . . and he had. He glanced again at his own Vulcan. You did warn me of your orders should I fail in this mission . . . why did you do it? What did you gain?

Spock felt the captain's gaze return to him time and again -- could feel those hazel eyes on his back, but did not turn. He knew what the human would be thinking. He had destroyed an entire planet's population and had the full protection and backing of the Empire . . . once again.



After his shift ended, Spock took to his cabin directly. He had much to contemplate, and felt somewhat safer now that he had reprogrammed the captain's tantalus device, though he would still be vulnerable to its visual intrusion.

Spock lay on his bed, thinking; recalling the mirror counterparts. He remembered telling the mirror captain that terror must be maintained, but he reconsidered that idea now. If terror is the only incentive for order and obedience . . . then why am I not taking the captain's place?

The Vulcan wondered if the captain felt any regrets over the constant killing. Spock had always found it distasteful, though that had never stopped him from doing what was required of him. He was a Vulcan warrior in the Empire's service, and as such certain things were expected -- demanded of him. Still, he was also a man of logic and reason, and to take by force what can be gotten by less brutal means was not logical.

He took the dagger from his belt and held it up, catching the red glow of the warrior's prayer light. Spock's mind kept hearing the sound of the mirror captain's voice over and over, and those particular words: "In every universe there's one man with a vision."



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Spock had not allowed himself to contemplate personal vision, only the requirements of the Empire -- Starfleet regulations, warrior code, Vulcan protocol. Each step he had taken to insure his position was taken within the confines of one of these directives.

Images of the mirror physician came to mind -- feelings, knowledge. Spock had learned of the mirror **Enterprise**, its world, its captain and crew; in addition to the soft and sentimental Dr. McCoy. Spock sighed and closed his eyes in regret. If only he had not forced a meld on the doctor, if only he had not seen, or felt. **I feel what you feel, I know what you know.** Yes, Spock admitted to himself, it was all too painfully true. The loyalty and affection that the mirror others had felt for each other -- their willingness to sacrifice their own safety for that of the others -- Spock had felt . . . and wanted.

As the Vulcan allowed himself further contemplation of the truths he had discovered in the physician's mind, the dagger fell from his hands. Dr. McCoy actually cared enough about his condition to remain behind to give him medical aid. Spock found this difficult to accept or understand. McCoy's mind had held such a depth of friendship and love for his own Vulcan that it allowed him to see parts of his friend in an alien Spock.

The forced meld was something McCoy had never experienced, and it was harmful to him. Spock now regretted that. During the meld, he had learned that the alternate Vulcan was more than capable of such feats, yet never forced them. That man was one motivated by logic, reason and loyalty; rather than fear and greed and was more concerned about maintaining control and power over himself.

From the memories in the alternate doctor's mind, Spock felt certain that the alternate captain and first officer had a very deep and secure relationship as people, as well as officers.



Suddenly, Spock realized that in his distraction he had forgotten to activate his own tantalus device so he would know if the captain were watching him. He had placed the activating switch in an inconspicuous place so he could activate it even while the captain was watching.

To fear the very things you are drawn to . . . such is the irony of my world, Dr. McCoy. Trust here demands a high price . . . and compassion is synonymous with fool. The device was activated, and the soft hum that only a Vulcan could hear, indicating the captain was watching him, was absent.

Spock redirected his thoughts to the day's events. After the meld with the physician, Spock's first desire was to meld with the mirror captain, take his thoughts and feelings -- learn what he felt for his Vulcan. But when he had entered the transporter room and looked into those bold, yet hopeful hazel eyes, Spock knew he could not force such intimacy from the man. He had seen the expectation of decency in the captain's eyes and had been touched by it. He wanted to prove to that man that

he was decent -- was not simply a barbarian, even though he often behaved like one. Why? Why was your opinion of me important?

Spock had always considered the Romulans to be soft and weak, but recognized now that many of the qualities the mirror crew displayed were also true of the Romulans. Spock wondered, casually, what each universe would be like if the Romulans and Klingons from the alternate's universe were switched with those of his own. He had gained much information from his meld with the alternate McCoy. One universe made up of brutal races and one solely of more civilized ones. One of those universes would be very short-lived. And Spock knew which it would be.

It was time for him to shower and change for the evening meal. As Spock stood up to undress he heard the soft hum of his warning device. The captain was watching. But, Marlena also knows how to use the device, perhaps she . . .



Captain Kirk was in the officer's lounge for supper but he did not have much of an appetite. He felt a flicker of shame at spying on the one man who had proven his loyalty, though Kirk admitted that his spying was not simply to keep track of the Vulcan's activities. He enjoyed looking at the Vulcan -- seeing him in his own environment. The alienness of the man was emphasized when Kirk chanced to see him meditating before his warrior's fire, the red glow of its light detailing his face.

Kirk sensed the presence of the very man in question. He looked up to see the Vulcan heading for his table. Kirk did not know why, but he could almost always feel when Spock was near. Part of him resented the man's influence over him.

Spock realized that the captain was watching him and approached the table as though he were totally unaware of the tantalus device and his spying. Surreptitiously, Spock's personal Vulcan guards skirted him from some distance, their keen hearing and sight allowing him the luxury of being guarded without being crowded.

Kirk glanced at the guards casually, realizing there were many more Vulcans not present on the ship, who had pledged their lives to Spock. It gave him pause whenever he felt the need to challenge the Vulcan. There was no need for challenge this evening, though. Spock had more than supported him and Kirk was still somewhat puzzled by it.

"Evening, Spock."

"Good evening, Captain." The Vulcan answered softly.

Kirk began eating, and, after a few moment's silence, decided to begin the discussion, "Spock, do you know how the mix up happened?"

Spock locked eyes with the human. "I can only estimate that the force of the storm was enough to cause a temporary interface between the two universes. Perhaps,

had not the two groups been in the process of transporting at the same time, no one would have realized the interface was there."

Kirk nodded and took another forkfull, then laid down the utensil. "Spock, you should have seen your counterpart."

"Indeed," Spock commented, already knowledgeable on the subject.

"Yes, most of them were . . . well, not weak stock, certainly, but lacking drive, ambition, strength. Their Spock, well, I sensed he was strong. He was quiet and unruffled -- very firm. Locked us up the moment we transported aboard. A decisive man, but not like you."

"Not at all?"

Kirk grinned. "Not even if he grew a beard. He reminded me of the Romulans, with that arrogant certainty that he would always be one step ahead."

"When we're finished with the Halkan's cleanup here, we've been ordered to the Klingon outpost planet Katal." Kirk abruptly changed the subject. "Should be worth our while," he smiled, "and you'll get a chance to test your unique abilities."

Spock nodded and took a deep breath. That meant they would be attacking a Klingon settlement planet, physically invading as well as using the ship's weapons. The Klingons would have little chance. The planet Katal had been long ago singled out by the Empire as one they wished to control.



Three days later, Spock was still concerned about the conflicting loyalties that tugged at him. The *Enterprise* was in orbit over Katal, and Spock did not wish to see another attack against defenseless people; yet he had taken an oath to the Empire and to Starfleet.

"We are within beaming range of Katal, Captain."

"All right, Spock, when ready, disrupt their power sources, then I want phasers on all military and transportation and communication facilities. Do they have any satellite beacons?"

"Removing them now, Sir." Spock replied. A few moments later, all communications, transportation and military facilities had been hit. The large city was in chaos. "Security teams beaming down, Captain," Spock straightened and reported.

"Good. When they give us the word, we'll join them." Kirk stepped toward the science station, putting a hand to the back of Spock's chair. "We'll get citations for this, Spock, maybe even promotions. There's a lot of wealth and technological information on that planet."

Before he had met the alternate **Enterprise** crew, Spock would have been just as eager to add to his personal coffers. Now, however, it left him unmoved.

"Say, what the hell's the matter with you lately, Spock?" Kirk asked in an angry tone.

Spock looked at the captain's angry, suspicious face and answered honestly, "This attack will be similar to all others, Captain. They have ceased to interest me, other than for the purpose of doing my duty."

"And you'd better do it well, Mister." Kirk demanded. "I intend to get to the cabinet before I'm an old man."



The attack on the planet went quickly, brutally and with little resistance. There were few prisoners taken: only those whose knowledge would be useful to the Empire or Starfleet. The **Intrepid** had rendezvoused with the **Enterprise** at Katal, and the Vulcan crew had little difficulty finishing the work Kirk's crew had started.

Back in his cabin after the **Enterprise** had left Katal's orbit, Spock sat at his desk thinking about one particular remark of the Alternate Kirk. He had told Spock to be the captain of this ship, and create change. At this moment, Spock wanted change. He had done his share of killing in the past few days -- enough for his lifetime. He wanted no more, and could see that the Empire was headed for destruction.

He activated his tantalus field, knowing that Kirk was not presently watching him. Captain Kirk was not in his cabin, so Spock checked the bridge. He deactivated the tantalus field after being unable to locate the captain. He wondered, if given no other choice, if he would be able to kill the human.

The Vulcan left his cabin, wanting to speak with Dr. McCoy about the alternates. Marlena met him in the corridor. "Good evening, Commander Spock," she said, with a twinkle in her eyes.

"Good evening, Marlena," Spock said, stopping to acknowledge her.

She smiled and stated, "I have my own cabin now. I'm no longer the captain's woman."

Spock wondered if she may be making an invitation, "And what of the captain?"

"Oh, he doesn't care anymore. All he could do was watch you on that monitor of his. Oh, don't worry. I haven't told anyone about it. I have no desire to die young. I'm my own woman now, free to make choices."

Spock glanced at her, "And those choices include?"

"I would like them to include you, Commander Spock. You are the most powerful man on this ship now, and, if I might add, one of its handsomest."

Spock hesitated, then asked, "Are you saying you wish to . . . to get to know me in depth?"

She smiled. "We could start with an introduction, no? I'm off duty this evening."

Spock's expression did not change, but he nodded and turned in the hall, "My cabin is not safe."

"I know."

Spock and Marlena headed for her cabin. Once inside, Spock seated himself on a low divan while Marlena ordered a Vulcan drink for him and something for her. She spoke to him in a soft, lilting voice as she handed him his glass. He took it without drinking.

"I heard the captain was upset with you for not joining in more eagerly on the kill today. Don't tell me you've developed scruples, Mr. Spock."

Spock bristled, her remark coming dangerously close to irritating him. "Do not concern yourself with my personal compunctions." He walked to a cabinet where a large, ancient text lay. He opened it to read the ancient, hand scribed Vulcan and sipped his drink.

As she watched, Marlena commented, "A gift from the captain. Can you read it? She felt pleasure at displaying the treasure in front of him, hoping it would hurt.

Spock felt a pang of resentment that the captain would give such a precious item to a human who could not begin to appreciate its significance. Spock took a drink and clutched at his stomach, which was now beginning to burn intensely. He sat the drink down, and tried to take a breath. His throat was burning. His guards would, at any moment, enter the room and aid him, for they were sensitized to his physical and mental state.

The pain worsened and his legs started to buckle under him. Still, his guards did not come. He turned toward the woman with disbelief. She sat on the couch smiling, hatefully. "I was beginning to wonder if it would work. I tripled the human dose especially for you, Spock."

"Poison." He gasped, leaning his back against the support of the cabinet.

She stalked toward him, her eyes bright and dark, "If not for you, I would still be the Captain's Woman -- my place, my status assured. But you! You had to ruin it! If not for you . . . "

Spock blinked, dazed, as the woman disappeared before his eyes. The tantalus field! Where are my guards?

Spock's pain was worse. He scanned the room for a monitor, but could not find it. The captain had to have been watching them for some time -- was watching him now -- perhaps already putting his finger on the kill button.

His knees gave way and he turned to clutch the cabinet, but it was too late. He was losing consciousness and collapsed to the floor.



Distant sounds and beeping brought the Vulcan's mind to the surface. He opened his eyes tentatively, and tried to focus.

"Wha. . . ?" Spock tried to speak.

"Don't try to talk, Spock. Your throat is gonna be out of commission for a while. You just made it. Must have neutronium lining in that stomach of yours."

"M . . . McCoy?" Spock opened his eyes wider, and saw the physician hovering over him. For a moment he thought he had somehow been transferred to that other universe with its compassionate doctor.

"You were poisoned, Spock." The doctor explained. "Lucky the captain found you and got you to sickbay."

Spock knew he must have misinterpreted McCoy's words, for he was certain the captain would not do such a thing. He also wondered where his own guards had been. Then, he recalled Marlena disappearing in the tantalus field. But the captain's device was inactivated . . . by me. How could he . . . He's been in my cabin! He has seen and used my duplicate field. A sudden chill filled the Vulcan as he realized the captain must know everything. Kirk killed Marlena because he realized she had to have been the one to tell Spock about the Tantalus device; and now, he was toying with Spock before the kill.

Oh, yes, it is your style, Captain. You could not allow me to die at the hands of your traitorous woman. You have to kill me yourself. A calm spread through the Vulcan. Logic dictated that he could do little to deter what lay ahead. He had lived by violence all his life, to die by violence would be fitting. To die by captain Kirk's hand was also, in some strange way, appropriate. He had played the game, and lost.

The next morning, Spock was feeling much better. The captain entered and sat next to Spock's bed. "You seem to be recovering nicely, Spock." He purposely did not mention Marlena. Spock nodded. "I have news," Kirk said in his toying way and Spock knew the game was beginning. "which might interest a loyal officer like you. I had Chekov and Sulu sent to the agony booth as a little . . . farewell gesture . . . before I had them killed. I won't tolerate mutiny or disloyalty," he said with precision.

So, thought the Vulcan, he is telling me to look over my shoulder and wait for him to strike. Spock was surprised that he had actually thought the captain would spare the lives of the two officers. He had hoped Kirk might tire of the killing as he

had. Spock considered whether it would help to mention Marlena and thus show Kirk he was aware of the game, or remain silent and hope that perhaps Kirk did not know as much as Spock first believed.

"Aren't you going to ask?" Kirk said with a deceptive smile.

"Ask what?" Spock managed, keeping his face blank.

"Why, about Marlena. She did . . . leave . . . rather abruptly, don't you think?"

Spock took a deep breath; it was over, nothing to hide. "You killed her, did you not?"

"And how could I have done that with a neutralized tantalus?" Kirk leaned close to the Vulcan, his face only inches away, "You reprogrammed it after Marlena told you all about it, leaving me unprotected." Kirk's voice was a hiss on the last word.

"You were never unprotected."

"No? Without that field, I'm an open target." The captain would not believe what the Vulcan seemed to be trying to tell him. Everyone was out to cover his own hide, and Kirk knew it.

The first thing the captain had done when he found the field in the Vulcan's cabin, was to find and kill the Vulcan's guards. He was still hurt, and angry, that Marlena had turned on him -- left him vulnerable to Spock. He also wondered how she obtained the ancient Vulcan text he had meant for Spock to have.

"Why did you wait, Spock? You should have taken your chance to kill me when the opportunity presented itself. Now it's too late, and you no longer have your tantalus field. In addition, you won't find your personal guards on this ship -- MY ship -- anymore." Kirk's voice rose in ending.

Spock blinked, realizing why they had not come to aid him. However, he refused to dishonor Vulcan by seeking escape. There was no escape from the captain on the insulated world of a starship. The least he could do would be to defend himself -- perhaps killing Kirk -- or die with dignity.

The captain left him with one final thought. "You'll never know if this is the day, if this is the place, Spock. I'll be watching."

A day later, Spock was released from sickbay and returned to his duties. The tantalus field in Spock's cabin had been removed, as well as all the tapes concerning its construction. He would have no chance to create a new one even though the information was clear in his memory.

That evening, Spock was still weary from the poisoning and stress. He knelt before the warrior light. As he reached out to light the incense, the light, the statue and the platform all blinked out of existence. He pulled back his hand quickly, trying to cover his surprise, wanting to show as little reaction for the captain as possible.

As the weeks passed, the captain continued his threatening attacks, and Spock's nerves began to fray. He realized he would have to force a confrontation soon.

During the night after a particularly harrowing day, Spock was roughly awakened by armed guards, and dragged from his bed in the middle of the night to the agony booth. The captain was standing outside with a smug grin. Spock ignored him, saying nothing as the guards bound him to the mechanism.

Spock wished for more of his mirror twin's pain control techniques as the captain increased the torture. He knew Kirk would not relent until he had forced a scream from him, or he begged for the captain's mercy. Spock knew there was no mercy in the human to appeal to, and he was determined to rob the captain of the pleasure of hearing him beg or cry out.

He clenched his jaws so tightly, keeping the cries from escaping, that his teeth ached from the pressure. The searing pain of the agonizer was like nothing he had ever felt or imagined. It was as though his body were on fire and being torn apart at the same time. One last effort as the captain ordered the next level, allowed Spock to fix his pain-darkened eyes on the human in glaring rage. But, as the torture was increased, a weak, animal's growl of agony escaped the Vulcan's throat. The last thing Spock saw was the ashen face of Captain Kirk.



Spock opened his eyes, timidly, to focus and look around. He could not move, but saw he was in his own cabin, lying on his bed. Spock had no idea how long he had been here, or what time it was. His body would not obey his commands, but twitched minutely and echoed of pain.

He was too disoriented and stunned to feel rage or vengeance, his only true awareness was of the fact of his imminent demise. His body was already in the first stages of death, and the thought of his life seeping from him slowly was abhorrent to him. He had been unable to secure his life, but Spock was determined he would at least die with some dignity. Kirk would not rob him of that.

Dr. McCoy, though not as vicious as Dr. M'Benga, could not be trusted to help. Spock was certain the physician would love nothing better than to have a weakened Vulcan in his control. Still, Spock realized he would need some medications for a time to help him remain on his feet just long enough to do what he must.

When Spock was finally able to dress, he headed for sickbay. McCoy turned to see the Vulcan enter, and surprise was plain on his face. "Doctor, I require stabilizer."

"Oh yeah, Doctor Spock, and what kind of stabilizer do you prescribe?"

"One which will lower the activity levels of my nervous system and metabolism. Perhaps an antihemophilic would also be useful."

McCoy listened to the level voice, and studied the drained pallor of the skin; the dullness of the eyes, "And just who is all this for?"

"Myself, Doctor."

"I can't just hand over potent medications like that. How do I know you won't use them on someone else. It could kill someone." His voice was full of suspicion.

Spock moved ominously closer, his dark eyes fixing the human to the spot. "I have no time for your paranoia, Doctor. If you do not give me the medications, I shall make them myself."

McCoy nodded, deciding it better not to argue. "Okay, I'll get them." When he returned, the Vulcan was lying on the floor, unconscious. Orderlies helped the doctor get the man on a monitor bed, and McCoy examined Spock. He could not believe his eyes for a moment, and recalibrated the device. The same fatal reading was evident. He measured the medicines and pressed the hypo to the Vulcan's neck. The medicines would slow the process, but nothing would stop it now. McCoy studied the unconscious man, and contemplated his feelings for him. After having met Spock's alternate, the doctor could not help but see his own Vulcan in a new light. He wondered what he would have become had he not grown up in a world of suspicion and greed.

Considering the ruthlessness of the Empire, McCoy admitted that Spock, though one of its strongest employees, was far from one of its cruelest. In fact, Spock had always been one of its most reasonable -- certainly its most honorable. If Spock were going to kill someone, he always faced them squarely -- no ambush or death through a second or third party. Yes, you're worth trying to save, Spock . . . trouble is, I don't think it's possible. McCoy surprised himself by feeling some regret at that.

Spock awoke, groggy and unstable for several minutes. Seeing he was in sickbay, he turned sharply to see McCoy by the bed.

"I gave you the medications, Spock, but they'll only give you some time. Does your urine already show blood?"

Spock raised a brow and inhaled deeply, "Yes."

"How about coughing it up?"

Spock swallowed, "Some."

"You must already know the rest -- extreme weakness, dizziness, pain, heart palpitations, arrhythmia, chil . . . "

"Enough, Doctor! I know what to expect. The medications, please. Then I will leave." Spock sat up and McCoy, without thinking, reached out a hand to support him. Spock stiffened in surprise, locking eyes with the human a moment.

McCoy took his hand away, embarrassed, "I'll get them."

Spock considered the human's action while he waited. The touch had conveyed a totally unexpected emotion which both threatened and comforted Spock.

The doctor returned and placed the medications and hypo into a shaky Vulcan hand. Immediately, Spock stepped down, and turned for the door. McCoy caught his arm, "Spock . . . I'm sorry."

The softly spoken words, with their strong current of emotion were more painful than the results of the agony booth session. Spock fought to ignore them -- to be untouched by them. "Don't be, Doctor." He hurriedly made his escape to the corridor without looking back.

Spock returned to his cabin as soon as his shift was over. He was panting when he finally dropped to his bed, his chest heaving with the effort to take in badly needed oxygen. Spock knew that if he were to maintain his dignity, he would have to finish this soon, before his conditions worsened. He should not let the captain win, he should kill him, giving himself that last act of power and status. Status? Why can I not do it? It would be so easy . . . walk to him on the bridge, rest my hand on the back of his chair . . . then break his neck.

Spock's self-loathing erupted and spilled through him as he realized why. His mind's image of his own hand breaking the captain's neck, seeing the life leave his eyes -- his heart stopping made Spock recoil in revulsion. Perhaps he could do it in the heat of passion, but not coldly, without emotion. He suddenly felt very weary and aged and began to cough again. Each time he did, the traces of blood became more apparent.

Spock tried, without success, to rest, but the pain that needled him was destroying his control. He entered the bathroom to relieve himself, hoping to rid himself of the burning as well, but was stunned to see the stream of blood flow from him. He undressed, washed, and put on a robe. His eyes fixed on the hypo a moment, considering another dose, but decided against it. The effort to cross the room to raise the temperature was almost too much for him, and he crawled into his bed, pulling a blanket over his shoulder.

Spock felt that if he could just rest a while his strength might return, and then he would come to a decision and force an end to the captain's game.



The captain had been watching the distressful scene from his tantalus monitor. He had seen the Vulcan's apparent weakness, had even watched him in the bathroom -- the blood.

Kirk lowered his eyes, wondering if he might have miscalculated. He could not understand the Vulcan's condition. Slowly, a smile spread over his face. Of course, he thought, the Vulcan is using the oldest strategy: pretend you are weak, vulnerable,

unable to fight back. Cause the enemy to underestimate you . . . then strike. Somehow, the Vulcan had found a way to trick him. At least he wanted to believe that.

Kirk studied the unmoving form on the bed, seeing the exaggerated rise and fall of the Vulcan's chest beneath the blanket. He had come to a decision.



The captain's guards rushed into the Vulcan's room, quickly surrounding his bed, daggers or agonizers drawn, ready for the unexpected. The sleeping Vulcan appeared unaware of their presence. Captain Kirk stepped close to the bed, with Doctor McCoy in tow.

"Wake up, Spock, game's over!" Kirk commanded. The Vulcan mumbled, turning on his side to cough, weakly.

Doctor McCoy scanned the First Officer for the captain's benefit. He already knew what was happening. Only the higher levels of the agony booth could do this to a healthy Vulcan adult.

Kirk studied the Doctor, "Well?"

"Captain, I don't need any more information on him. I told you, he isn't pretending. He came to me earlier for stabilizers and antihemophilics." As a small trickle of blood ran down the side of the Vulcan's half-opened mouth, McCoy frowned with sorrow. "Apparently, they didn't do much good."

"You're saying . . . " Kirk began, surprised.

"I'm saying, Captain, that Spock is dying."

When the captain stepped back, staring with disbelief at the physician, McCoy realized he really had not known. "Captain, you weren't aware that anything above level three in that booth will kill a Vulcan?"

"Humans take more than that, Doctor!" Kirk protested.

"Humans, yes, but Spock's Vulcan. His nervous system, internal systems are more finely tuned, more sensitive than a human's." McCoy explained patiently.

"What can you do for him?" Kirk's stomach had tightened into a cold knot.

McCoy was astonished. "Do for him?! You did it all, Captain. I can't undo the damage." The doctor hoped his harsh words would hurt the captain, for even in this savage, selfish universe, McCoy knew Spock was the only true friend Kirk had ever had, but his own suspicious nature would not allow him to see it.

Kirk's face was blank. He turned to study the Vulcan, his mind going back to that fateful night. He wouldn't cry out, wouldn't ask me to stop . . . and I needed, my ego needed him to beg me. I kept turning up the settings to force him to beg me to stop . . . but he didn't. At level seven he collapsed. Now Kirk recalled with sickening clarity the moan of agony and the hate-filled dark eyes. But . . . I didn't want you dead, Spock, not you. Not you! I didn't know . . . but you must have thought I did . . . must have believed I did mean to kill you . . .

The captain began to realize, remorsefully, how his suspicion and paranoia had tried to dismiss every loyal act the Vulcan had performed; minimized the Vulcan's support, while exaggerating the one thing Spock had seemingly done against him. But what could he do now? McCoy said Spock was dying.

"Get out. Everyone." Kirk said quietly.

After the others had left the room, Kirk settled on the side of Spock's bed. He timidly pressed one hand to the thin face. In spite of the dark beard, Spock had a peaceful, gentle look. The captain hoped the touch of his hand would help impart his feelings, his remorse to the Vulcan even though Spock seemed to be comatose.

Spock stirred, opening his eyes halfway, but avoiding Kirk's face. The captain grasped the cool hand and placed it to his face, tears dampening it. He waited, hoping Spock would speak to him through the touch, and soon he felt the gentlest mental touch, more like a soft breath. It whispered weakly to his mind.

Jim . . . the Empire cannot continue . . . do not be destroyed by it . . . suspicion, avarice. Take the Empire from its course . . . I can help. My safe is coded to your voice if you speak my name. The tape . . . Live long and prosper my alternate would have said . . . Be safe, my friend.

Kirk's eyes burned with liquid fire, his throat feeling the sting. The soft whisper ended like a breeze in passing, and he felt the slender hand slip in his grasp.

"Spock!" He stroked the placid face. "Spock!" Then he shook the unresponsive shoulders. He pressed his head to where the Vulcan's heart was located and more pain welled inside him, hearing the terrible silence.

The captain drew the blanket to the Vulcan's neck and sat with him in grieving silence for what seemed like hours. Stunned emptiness slowly gave way to the Vulcan's last words, and they ran repeatedly through the human's mind until he found himself standing in front of the safe.

"Spock" he said aloud, and tried the door. It opened, just as the Vulcan had said. Inside, among personal things, was a tape. He withdrew it and placed it in the viewer.

Captain Kirk had not thought any pain could rival that of Spock's dying in his arms . . . until he heard and saw the tape. Self-loathing and deep regret replaced his internal organs, beating with a dreaded life of their own. All this time, Spock . . . all these years . . . Why couldn't I believe in you?

Spock had given Kirk a list of secret enemies to watch, members of the crew and Terran as well as Vulcan civilians that could be trusted. McCoy's name was there. Spock gave Kirk the credit codes to his vast fortune, titles to his estates, and the names and loyalty of his many Vulcan operatives and friends. There would be no dispute for Spock had long ago sworn them to loyalty for Captain Kirk, second only to their loyalty to him.

Other pieces of vital information concerned the workings of the tantalus device; how to create and modify them. Other useful alien devices and weapons.

Spock and his operatives had amassed a great amount of personal information on top level military and civilian persons. Enough for Kirk to gain power and followers for his cause.

But would he change? Could he change, create a new life, new goals, not only for himself, but the Empire? Kirk wondered. The job was so immense, and yet, the man who knew him best was certain he could do it -- should do it.

The tape continued. Kirk's eyes widened as the information included top level Romulan and Klingon officials. Both groups wanted peace with the Empire, not capitulation.

Kirk had thought both races weak for they avoided killing, were squeamish of using their power to enslave. Yet, neither of them were poor cultures. If they could fare as well without the savagery, and in spite of attacks from the Empire . . . then . . . couldn't he?

His mind returned to the day the alternates had switched places with him and his people. It had started then for Spock, and perhaps it had also begun for him that day. Power through reason rather than force.

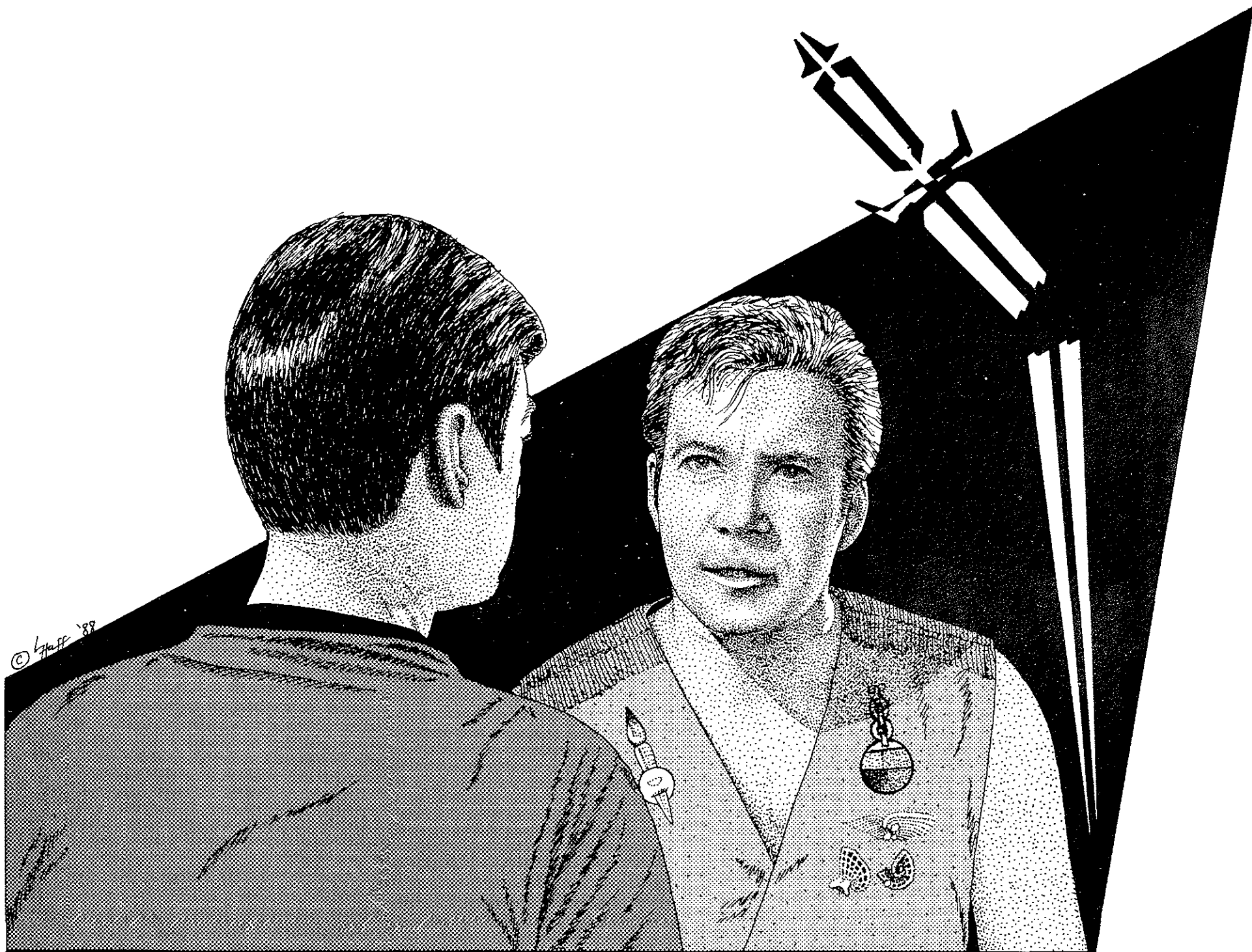
The tape ended, having shown Kirk the possibilities. If he could gain the trust of the Romulans and Klingons, perhaps he could change the Empire.

He crumbled forward on the bed, his head in his hands, filled with a depth of loss he would never have believed he was capable of feeling. His damp eyes fixed on Spock once again and he clasped a hand around one blanket covered ankle, "Please . . . forgive me, Spock. I can't bring you back for either of us . . . but I'll try my best to fulfill what was your desire. The paranoia of the Empire killed you, and it will kill . . . perhaps has . . . killed me. Unless I can change it."

He released the cool ankle, notified sickbay of Spock's death and waited.



The ceremony for the Vulcan was the most lavish McCoy had ever seen. It made clear to all what the Vulcan had meant to the captain. The crew was surprised. Some suspicious, some envious, some pleased.



When they said their farewells, Kirk gestured for McCoy to meet with him in his cabin.

"You wanted to speak with me, Captain?" McCoy asked, once they were alone in Kirk's quarters.

"Yes, Doctor . . . thank you for coming." McCoy was surprised by the thoughtful politeness, so alien to the Kirk he had known. "Change isn't easy . . . and total change is even more difficult." Kirk glanced up to see the confusion in the physician's face, "Spock told me I could trust you."

McCoy's brows shot up in surprise. Well, I'll be . . .

"Someone as . . . stubborn as me, sometimes has to learn the hard way that what is most meaningful to them is . . . what they have just lost." Kirk stood pacing and wringing his hands, his back tense. "Doctor, Spock thought we had a chance to change the Empire, to . . . find a new way . . . to end the brutality of our world. My respect for his judgment leads me to accept his opinion. What do you think?"

McCoy's mouth was open, and for several seconds he could think of nothing to say, "Ah . . . I . . . "

"Doctor, please . . . I know I can't ask you to trust me after everything that has happened, but if you're willing to take that chance . . . " Kirk's eyes pleaded to McCoy in a way not seen before, "Do you think it's possible? Would you help? Can we learn to trust each other?"

"Spock's death really hurt you, didn't it?"

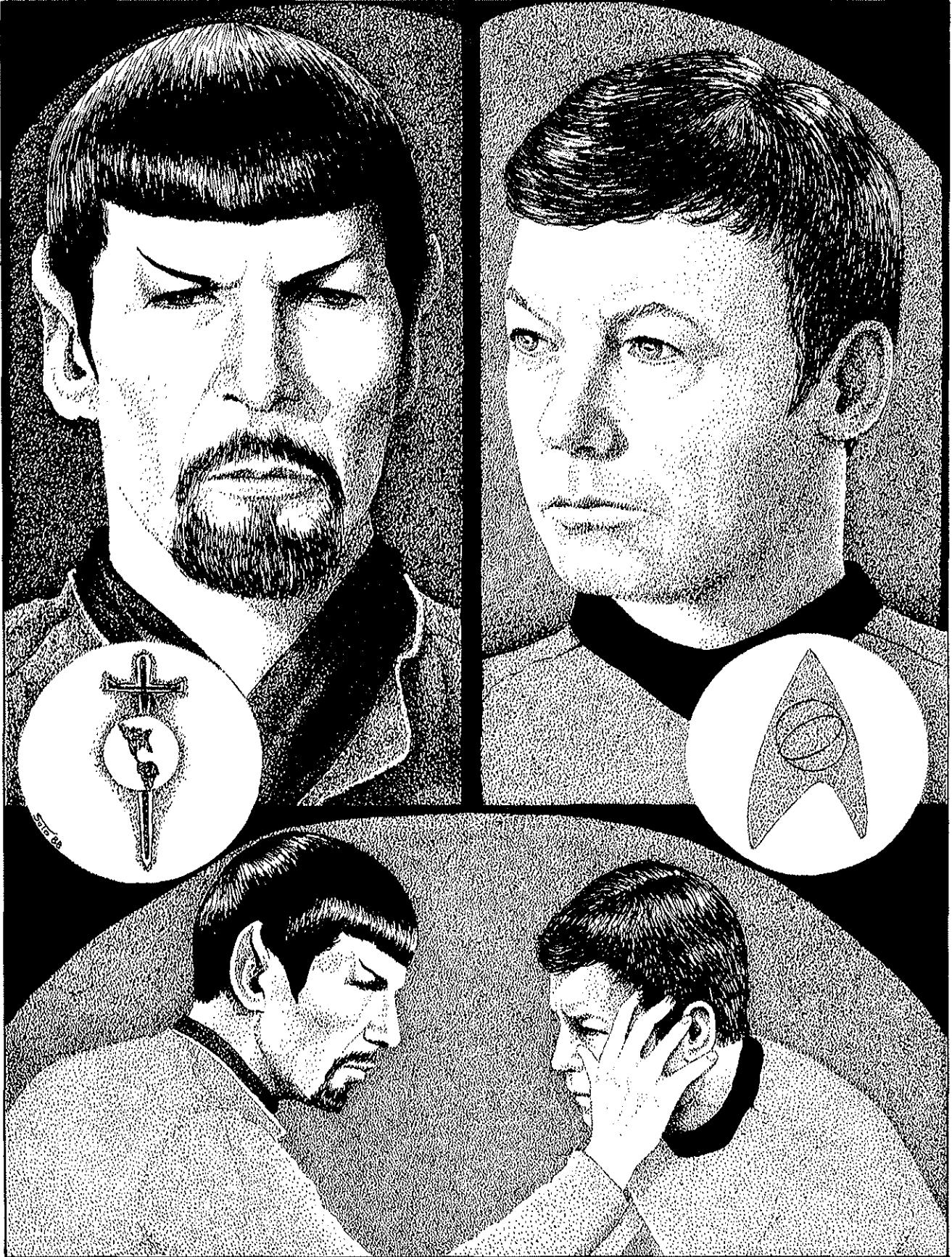
"More than I thought it would, Doctor. I can never undo what I did -- but I want to at least try to set in motion what Spock thought was possible. He left me with enough information, credits, and contacts, that I really think we have a chance. But I need someone close to trust."

The doctor thought he would never hear anyone say they needed him. His life had been drifting in a dark and murky sea too long, so long he had begun to forget there was a sun.

"For whatever it will mean to you . . . I give my word, to do whatever I can to help if you think we have a chance."

McCoy remembered the soft eyes, the look of integrity he had seen in the alternate Vulcan's eyes . . . and seen matched in his own Vulcan's eyes. Yes, he thought, it's worth fighting for, perhaps dying for. Spock thought so, both of them.

Kirk smiled with relief. "To show you that I'm serious, and placing my trust in you, there's a device here that no one but myself, and now you, knows about. It's called the tantalus field."



I N T R U S I O N

By:

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Our thoughts are one.
Or ... is it
My thoughts are yours.

Your intrusion into my mind
Has left an open wound
That may never heal.

At first I sense anger.
The absolute need to know
With no concern for me.

Then confusion...
Uncertainty as to direction
And whether to probe further

Hesitantly I open my mind
And let you in
Despite my fear.

As our thoughts intertwine
We both learn
Much of one another

You seek the truth
And as you learn
You become less intruding

I am afraid
But I also learn
You are not unlike your counterpart

You withdraw with caution
Suddenly fearful of my well-being
And with your eyes, you apologize

For you now realize
You have opened a wound
That may never heal.

Do you also realize
I would allow the intrusion again
For the friendship I embrace?

A friendship built on loyalty,
Trust and love.
Concepts alien to your world.

Alien, perhaps... but impossible?
I have to wonder
What will happen here after we are home.

Art
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THE WAY TO EMPIRE

By: Ellen Morris

The lights were low. It was better that way this evening, separating the two men from the rest of the universe with soft shadows and quiet, thoughtful company. James T. Kirk sat on one side of the desk in Spock's quarters, brandy snifter absently swirling in one hand. Spock sat across from him on the other side, a half-empty glass of kavah juice before him.

Spock broke the silence that had stretched between them. "Is something troubling you, Captain?"

Pulled from his reverie, Kirk glanced at Spock with a rueful smile and pensively sipped his brandy. "I was just thinking about . . . possibilities."

Spock raised an eyebrow. "Possibilities?"

Kirk turned to face his companion more fully. "I was thinking about parallel worlds, Spock. The fantastic chances and common happenstances that made this universe our universe and not some other."

"Logically, if this universe were some other it would still be ours, Jim. We would not be aware of others."

"And yet we are. The experience we just had -- and others like it -- have made us acutely aware that other universes -- other possibilities do exist." Kirk's eyes twinkled as he gazed at his friend, challenging his first officer's sparkling intellect, ready for one of their favorite pastimes -- their good-natured battles of wit.

"Nevertheless, in each universe we consciously exist -- just as we do here -- and though we are aware of other possibilities, the universe in which each one of our selves exists is the reality for that self."

"And yet, Spock, by necessity, those other selves are completely separate entities, having only the most superficial similarities to us."

"Quite the contrary, Captain. Rather I would postulate that our other selves on other planes are inextricably tied to the selves we are here and now. As my experience with your double dramatically demonstrated, in any universe you are a leader: strong, ambitious, dedicated to your convictions . . . "

Kirk's face darkened and he interrupted Spock's catalogue. "Even if those convictions include slaughtering millions of innocent people." He pulled at his drink.

"Those were the actions of a different James Kirk."

"Inextricably tied to this one."

"But neither responsible for nor to this one. I believe what we have seen are two individuals with the same . . . raw material, if you will . . . shaped into different forms by circumstance and experience. Had you been born into the environment of that other universe, logic suggests that you would have become the James Kirk I encountered when the transference occurred, because that is the James Kirk that was, in fact, born and raised in that environment. Reason suggests that the opposite is true as well."

Kirk considered the suggestion carefully, sipping at his brandy. "I saw a great deal of you in that other Spock," he stated quietly, eyes averted. "As if I were dealing with the same Spock, from a different point of view."

"In a sense that is precisely what happened, Captain. Although my contact with your double was not as protracted as yours with mine, I observed in that Kirk characteristics I have observed in you. It was not unlike examining a fine diamond from two different perspectives: the qualities were the same, yet the angle of observation was altered, exposing different facets to the light."

Kirk raised his eyes again and smiled. "I had no idea you were a jeweller, Mr. Spock."

"When the occasion arises . . . "

"I've been wondering where in their history their path departed from ours. Did Alexander live to a ripe old age? Did Napoleon triumph at Waterloo? It could have been any one of a hundred things." Spock could see Kirk warming to his subject. "You have to wonder what the turning point was, to create a universe so similar to and yet so different from ours. It's . . . humbling to consider that even one detail could have made this reality that one instead. Just how far are we -- really -- from that universe?"

"It could have been something much less significant than the possibilities you suggest, Jim. But the hypothesis is fascinating."

"It could have been, couldn't it? It could have been . . . " Kirk stopped a moment and the light in his eyes died suddenly. "It could have been something as simple as a social worker dying in a street accident."

Silence fell between them like early evening snow, and Spock sought a way out of that speculation. Every direction in which he cast for an answer, however, seemed to invariably bring him back to Kirk's reasoning. It seemed unavoidable simply because it made perfect sense. Acceding to the inevitable, he observed. "Yet we know that in the universe in which Miss Keeler lived -- and survived the accident -- there was no Federation, at least in any recognizable form."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because we have evidence to support the theory. Once the good doctor went back in time and saved Edith Keeler's life, the **Enterprise** disappeared. Based on your report on the alternate universe, though the outcomes of specific events differed, the incidents themselves did occur in that universe. Since we know that Miss Keeler's fate determined a main stream of history, allowing Germany to win or lose the Second World War, and directly or indirectly influencing the fate of the Federation, we know that the universe in which she survived is not the universe we just encountered, simply because there, the Federation existed in some form."

Kirk's look was distant. "It makes you wonder what became of us all in that universe, doesn't it?" The captain missed Spock's fingering his glass, his shifting of position. "Do we still have the records you made?"

Spock's answer was low. "Yes, Captain."

Kirk finished his brandy then. "Then we know, don't we?"

Spock responded carefully. "The record is most detailed."

"I should view it sometime."

"It makes most a fascinating study."

Kirk glanced at the chrono: 0110. "Probably too long a one for tonight, however," he concluded. He got up from his seat then and stretched out the kinks. "And we'll be arriving at Gamma Hydra Four tomorrow." He then turned to face Spock. "Thanks for the drink, Spock. Sleep well."

"Good night, Jim."

And Kirk was gone.

Without clearing away the glasses, Spock accessed one of his research files in the computer. He began to review one of his own summaries.

Project Guardian 17:04:0761

All evidence indicates that the Singh dynasty was finally overthrown in 2217 by a rebel faction led by Armbruster Kirk. Rule under this family was spotty and unstable until 2264, at which time the last of the line, James Kirk rose to power. His brother and predecessor George the Tyrant died under uncertain circumstances. The youngest individual ever to rise to ultimate power in this time line, James Kirk unified and stabilized not only Earth but most of the space held by the Terran Empire. His alliance with, rather than occupation of, the 40 Eridani system was revolutionary, alliance never before having been a goal of the Terran dynastic rulers. Under his rule was also initiated a program of space exploration for the sake of research as opposed to conquest. The Guardian's record ends with Kirk's audience with the Organian triumvirate, this having been the last incident of note occurring before our encounter with the Guardian on this plane. Detail studies of this period are attached in the following files.

There followed a list of catalogue numbers four screens long thus far. Spock's research and analysis of the data he had collected was by no means complete. He knew that it would probably take him at least the rest of the five year mission to finish thoroughly examining all the information he had gathered from the Guardian of Forever.

One thing was certain, however. Spock was not prepared to allow the captain access to the file now or in the very near future . . . at least until he could be with the human when he discovered this second alternate self -- an alternate self that Spock's studies indicated may have had a hand in the suspicious demise of not just his own brother, but of the ruler of 40 Eridani as well, an ethnocentric Vulcan named Sarek, so that his son, the alliance-minded Spock, might rise to power.

"Computer, this is Commander Spock. This and all other files related to the project code named Guardian are to be patterned to my voice print alone. No one else is to have access to these files without my pattern. Record."

"Working."

"This is Commander Spock -- voice print and lock."

"Working . . . recorded and locked."

"Computer off."

Spock then rose, cleared his desk and prepared for sleep. Lowering the lights, he tucked himself into bed. There in the darkness, holding off sleep only a moment more, he considered the fantastic chances and common happenstances that made this universe his universe. One detail, one minute change, led the way to empire.

Spock preferred the universe of the Federation infinitely.

Art by:
Caryl Sibbett

By: Lynn Syck &
Laurel Ridener



Hordes of natives poured down out of the dry, brown hills surrounding the narrow valley. Kirk, Spock and McCoy hid in large boulders above the natural amphitheater formed by the sparsely covered sloping hills. It seemed as if the entire population of the planet Galena was trying to assemble in the Gathering Place. The noise level enabled them to speak in normal tones.

"What do you make of all this, Jim?" McCoy asked, his voice awestruck.

Kirk watched the crowd for a few more moments before answering. "They sure don't look like a society that could produce a burst of energy large enough to be picked up by ship's sensors."

"Agreed," Spock offered. "They seem much more in line with the original planet survey of ten years ago: a feudal society of farmers and shepherds."

Indeed, the Galenans were poorly clothed in rough-hooded, homespun robes and all were barefoot. In keeping with the Prime Directive, the three Starfleet officers were dressed the same. They also carried no weapons or mechanical devices, depending on the scheduled rendezvous to return them to the ship.

"Wonder where the women are?" McCoy mused.

Kirk then noticed that all the figures below were indeed grown males with dark hair and beards. "I don't know. Maybe when we find out why they're all assembling here, we'll have our answer. The survey ten years ago indicated that this was their holy place, so it must be something pretty important."

Suddenly, the crowd erupted in a frenzied roar, waving their arms and jumping up and down, raising clouds of dust from the bare, sere earth. A figure in a pure white robe seemed to appear in front of them from out of nowhere. He walked up a slight rise until he could be seen clearly by the hundreds massed before him. He pushed back the hood that covered his head. The setting sun glinted off silver-gray hair that belied the young face under it. Clean-shaven, his face was slender and the arms he raised in exhortation were thin to the point of emaciation.

Whatever he was saying was drowned out in the response the men gave him. But it was evident that he held them fully enthralled as they lifted their arms in a mirror image of his gestures.

Kirk watched, occasionally exchanging curious looks with Spock and McCoy. Suddenly, the leader pointed, and it seemed to Kirk that he was pointing directly at him. Some thrill of fear ran down his spine. But that was crazy, there was no way the man could see them from where he was. Then the sound of running feet was heard behind them. They turned as one to see twenty or so of the bearded men approaching from the rear. Their faces were suffused with anger and several carried sticks and rocks.

"Come on! Let's get out of here!" Kirk shouted, turning to start down the steep face of the cliff in front of them. He glanced quickly toward where the gray-haired leader had been in time to see a pillar of blue light form and swallow up the man. So much for bursts of unexplained energy.

There was no time for further thought and he began picking out a trail of sorts made up of precarious hand-holds and inches-wide balancing points.

Kirk reached solid ground first, the others only a step or two behind. He looked both ways, hoping to find a hiding place of some kind. Suddenly, McCoy yelled behind him.

"Jim! Look!"

They came at them from three sides, voices screaming over and over what had become a wild chant of death: "Veritas! Veritas! Veritas!"

Spock moved to place himself in front of Kirk and McCoy. It was a position of defense he had chosen for himself long ago and even sheer numbers could not sway him from it. Thus, he was the first to fall, struck down by a blow to the head from a length of blue wood. Drops of green blood spattered Kirk's face and robe.

"Spock!" He moved toward his fallen friend, aware of McCoy at his side. Then he was aware of nothing but pain and being covered -- smothered, buried alive by the press of bodies. He could not draw enough breath to scream as he was struck and trampled. It seemed to last an eternity before the welcome release of unconsciousness took him.



By the time M'Benga reached the transporter room with a team of med-techs, Kirk was awake and kneeling next to McCoy. He stood aside to let them do their work. In the next second, he realized that Spock was not there.

Scott entered the room on the run. "Captain, are ya' all right?"

"Never mind me. Where's Spock?"

"I dinna know, sir. When the transponders signalled distress, we waited until the area was clear and beamed ya' back. Your signal and the doctor's were the only ones we picked up."

Kirk felt that same thrill of fear and now for good reason. "Ship's sensors?"

He knew the answer before Scott responded. The engineer would have done everything possible to find Spock as soon as it became evident he was missing.

"Nothing, sir."

Swallowing hard, Kirk turned back to McCoy. "How is he?" he asked M'Benga.

The doctor stood and indicated to the techs to move McCoy's stretcher out. "Broken ribs, concussion, possible internal injuries. He's not good but I think he'll make it. And I also think you'd better come to sickbay with me."

Kirk shrugged off the compassionate hand M'Benga placed on his arm. "Later. I'll be on the bridge. When you have a complete report on McCoy, I want it."

M'Benga took a single step, planting himself squarely in front of Kirk.

"No, sir. A preliminary examination now, or a trip to sickbay under restraints."

Kirk lifted his chin, locking eyes with the doctor. Neither moved for the span of several heartbeats. At last, Kirk smiled a fleeting, tentative smile. "You've been taking lessons from McCoy, haven't you?"

M'Benga did not flinch. "Your decision, sir?"

"Now will do just fine, Doctor," Kirk capitulated, waiting none-too-patiently as M'Benga made one thorough scan, followed quickly by a second.

"You're a bloody mess, but no serious injuries. Please report to sickbay at your earliest convenience."

Kirk nodded, already halfway to the lift when he heard M'Benga add, "I took lessons from the best, Captain." Kirk smiled. It was not until he was safely behind the closed doors that he allowed himself to feel the battered, bruised shell that was his body. Blood dripped slowly from a cut on his head and dark bruises covered his arms. His sides ached with every breath but more, his heart ached with a fear that burned through him like wildfire. Where was Spock? Alive, somehow he knew that, had to believe that. Obviously, the man they had seen, Veritas?, was something more than a simple native religious leader and just as obviously, he must have some connection with Spock's disappearance.

The lift door opened and he moved to the center seat, determined to use every facility at his disposal to find Spock and bring him home.

"Is he dead?" The young voice close to his ear was the first thing Spock heard. Keeping his eyes closed, he tried to discern where he was. The surface beneath him was cold and hard, not the dusty, sun-warmed ground where he had fallen. And the voice he had heard had echoed, so he would seem to be inside.

Venturing to open his eyes, he found himself surrounded by a group of dark-haired, dark-eyed boys ranging in age from approximately toddlers to adolescents. They regarded him with a mixture of curiosity and fear.

Easing himself up to a sitting position, Spock looked around. He was in a cave with three walls and a ceiling composed of a glittering black rock, probably volcanic. There were geological reports of many active and inactive volcanoes in this area of the planet. The fourth wall was not composed of any natural substance. It was covered by the wavering blue light of a force field.

A number of questions quickly posed themselves to him but before he could begin to ask them, the boys that had surrounded him began to silently and slowly back away, their eyes on the fourth wall.

Spock turned to see Veritas standing beyond the force field, the smile on his handsome face belied by the evil glinting in his wide green eyes.

The Vulcan shivered involuntarily and struggled to his feet. A quick mental inventory of his physical condition revealed bruises and sore muscles but nothing of a serious nature.

"I am delighted you are awake, Spock of Vulcan. We have many things to discuss."

"Who are you and how do you know my name?" he demanded evenly.

"All in good time. Soon you will know that I wish you to know and what you will do for me. The telling will be accomplished thusly."

The invasion of his mind came so swiftly there was no chance to barrier against it. Veritas was there, grasping, ravaging, claiming Spock's mind for his own with a power beyond any the Vulcan had ever felt and he was defenseless against it.

Clutching his head, he fell to his knees, then to the ground, writhing in agony as the alien mind tore at his. All that he was or could be retreated to a small, safe corner and watched with wild-eyed fear as Veritas took control and spoke to the Vulcan's unasked questions.

I came here only a short time ago. I assumed the body of this one they call Veritas, a revered religious leader. It began as an experiment, a study in power. The only like-minds are the adult males and they are but weaklings. I hold their precious male children against their good behavior but it is hardly necessary.

I grew weary of the game and would have left but my ship was destroyed by a lava flow where I had hidden it. Then, at the gathering, I sensed the strength of your

mind at once — that is what led me to you. I know who you are and where you come from. I have awaited such a chance and now you have come. You will deliver your Enterprise to me.

Spock recoiled at the idea, pulling farther away into his small haven of safety. Veritas laughed aloud.

It will do you no good to hide. You will do as I say, for alone you do not have the strength to do otherwise. The first step will be to place you in control of the ship and crew in the simplest way possible. And so, without raising questions or being detected, you will kill James T. Kirk.

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Kirk was into his second shift on the bridge and so far the only good news he had had was that McCoy was in stable condition, resting comfortably under sedation and expected to be out of sickbay in a day or two. He sat slumped in his seat, head resting on his hand, when Lt. Shelley Milligan, Chekov's replacement for the shift, emitted a low whistle.

Kirk looked up into a pair of smiling blue eyes. "Sir, ship's sensors are indicating a Vulcan life sign on the planet."

Kirk stood, heart racing, and hurried to her side. "Anyone else around him?"

"Negative, sir. He seems to be in an open area beyond the mountain."

"Very well. Beam him up. I'll be in the transporter room. Notify M'Benga to meet me there."

He turned and headed for the lift, giving instructions as he went. "Call Mr. Scott to the bridge. In the meantime, Lieutenant, you have the conn."

Her delighted, "Yes, sir!" was lost as the door closed behind him. The lift seemed to move in slow motion and by the time he reached the transporter room, Spock was standing on the pad. Kirk hurried up to him, reaching out to take hold of his arm.

"Spock, are you all right? What happened down there? Where have you been?"

Kirk watched the Vulcan's face light in response to his concern but only for the smallest of moments. Then the look faded and Spock seemed to pull into himself, to draw away without moving a step.

"I am unhurt, Captain. As to where I have been, I . . . I cannot answer that question."

M'Benga came in, med-scanner in hand and silently took a reading. At Kirk's questioning look, he reported, "He seems a little battered but no serious traumas, Captain."

"There is one serious problem, Doctor. Mr. Spock cannot remember where he has been for the last twelve hours or so."

He turned to look at Spock. "I want you to accompany Dr. M'Benga to sickbay for a full medical check. And I'm going with you."

Spock nodded briefly and proceeded to follow M'Benga out the door. Kirk hesitated briefly a moment as all the mental warning signals in his mind went to full alert at the same time, then went after them.



Hours later, Kirk lay in his bunk. Sleep would not come and he knew that he could not force it, no matter how much his body and mind needed it. There were too many unanswered questions -- too many damned mysteries to suit him. He had stood at McCoy's bedside, wishing so much that the doctor was awake and able to help him with his usual sound advice or at least to act as a sounding board.

M'Benga's tests of Spock had revealed nothing, his conclusion "selective amnesia", though the doctor had had to admit that he had never heard of such a condition in a Vulcan. So, as Spock had insisted, he had released him to his quarters with orders to rest. And he had ordered the same for Kirk. Unfortunately, being given such an order and following it were two entirely different things.

Kirk stood, suddenly feeling the need for some kind of physical release from the tension. Pulling on exercise clothes, he left his cabin and headed for the gym.

The pool area was deserted when he entered and he was relieved. He was not in the mood to make small talk. Going into the changing area, he donned a pair of trunks and returned to the pool. He was about to dive in, when he noticed that there was someone already in the water at the deep end. And that someone was in trouble. Running around the side, he saw thrashing arms clear the water and then the face -- Spock! He dove in and reached the flailing Vulcan in a few strokes.

Kirk managed to get his arm around Spock's neck but the Vulcan struggled and pulled away.

"Spock! Stop it! Let me . . ." Suddenly, strong hands grasped his upper arms and pulled him under. Water filled his mouth and nose and he felt the first stirrings of panic. He squirmed away and made for the surface.

"Spock! Stop fighting me!" Now an arm came around his throat and he had only time for a quick breath before he was pulled under once more.

His pulse pounded in his ears, a loud throbbing that seemed to count the moments of life he had left if he could not get away from Spock. He fought, twisting and struggling, to no avail and then could fight no more. All strength left his arms and legs and he went limp as conscious thought began to leave him.

Suddenly, he was aware of other hands reaching for him, pulling him to the surface, then up onto the deck around the pool. They turned him onto his side as he choked and threw up the water he had swallowed.

"Easy, Captain. You'll be okay in a minute." It was Sulu's voice and he heard murmurs of other voices as well. Finally, he opened his eyes as they eased him onto his back. "Spock? Where's . . . Spock?"

He saw Sulu exchange uneasy glances with someone out of his line of sight. "He's all right, sir. He . . . he left a minute ago. Didn't say a word, just walked right out."

Sulu's words chilled him and he began to shiver. Someone brought a blanket and covered him while they waited for the med-techs. It did not help. The cold that claimed him began in his heart where no outside warmth could reach.



Later, in sickbay, he got his chance to talk with McCoy. Worried blue eyes watched his approach.

"Are you okay?" McCoy asked in a weak but apprehensive voice.

Kirk pulled a chair up to the bed. "Yeah. I guess. I mean, M'Benga says I'm fine. Physically."

He saw McCoy attempt to sort through the list of unconnected and illogical statements. And fail.

Sighing, Kirk leaned back in his seat to study the ceiling. "Something's wrong, Bones. Really wrong. But I don't know what it is."

"Well, that certainly makes things clearer," McCoy said with a wry smile. "Any chance you could clarify that a bit?"

"Ever since we found Spock and brought him back aboard, he's been -- acting like a Vulcan. I mean distant, cold -- the way he was when I first met him -- but not even that. Even in the beginning, I could sense that underneath that supposedly unfeeling exterior, there was something more, something I could reach. I don't feel that now and it scares me, more than I can say."

McCoy pulled himself up to a sitting position. "Your intuition is usually pretty accurate, but somehow I think it's more than intuition. Am I right?"

Kirk stood and began pacing restlessly. "You know what happened at the pool. I saw Spock was in trouble and I went in after him. He seemed to panic and the more I tried to save him, the more he struggled."

"Not unusual in a person who thinks he's drowning," the doctor offered, playing devil's advocate.

The pacing stopped and Kirk stared at some distant vision that only he could see. "That's what scares me, I guess. I don't think he was."

McCoy's eyebrow lifted in surprise. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

Kirk grimaced and shook his head. "I don't know what I'm saying, really. But I intend to find out what happened down there in those hours that he was missing. Somehow, that's the key to the whole thing, despite the fact that none of M'Benga's tests showed a thing."

He noticed McCoy's pale face and realized that the doctor was still far from recovered, no matter how much he might need him. "I've got to get to the bridge. Please, just rest and get better. Whatever's going on, we'll take care of it."

Kirk left then, wishing he could be as certain of his words as they sounded.



Before going to the bridge, Kirk went to Spock's cabin. He signalled for entry and, after several moments wait, the door opened.

Spock stood in the center of the room, dressed in black shirt and slacks. Kirk looked for some sign of welcome in the dark eyes but saw only coldness, less recognition than one would give a total stranger.

Kirk swallowed his unease and tried a small smile. "M'Benga tells me he's confined you to quarters for twenty-four hours."

"Unnecessary. I am quite capable of returning to my duties."

"Still, I agree that a little precaution is in order."

There was no response and Kirk began to shift uneasily where he stood. "After dinner, maybe you would like to play a game of chess?"

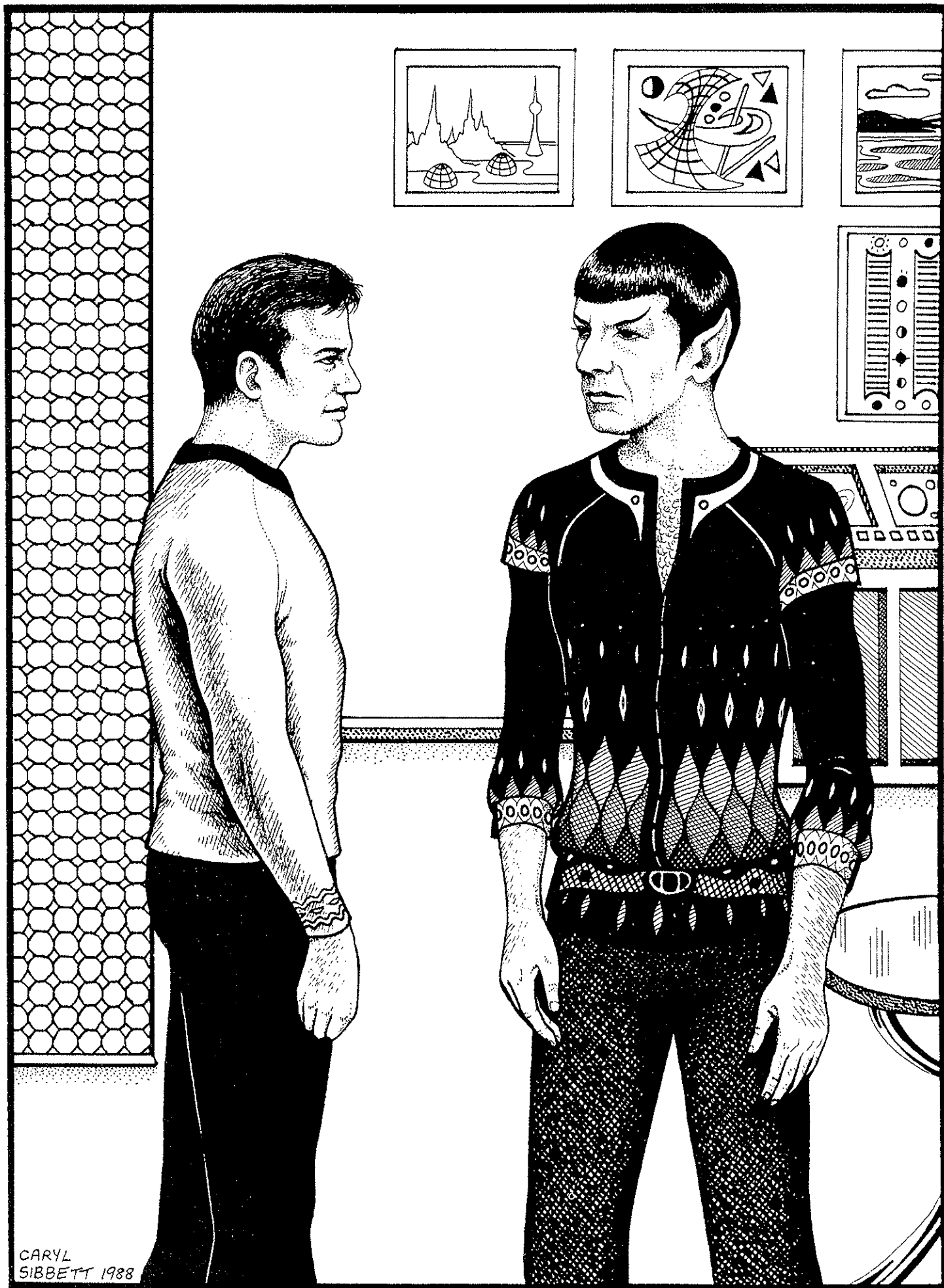
The Vulcan turned his back, ignoring the question.

Kirk felt the fear begin to build again. There had to be a way to reach his friend. "If you're feeling uncomfortable about what happened at the pool, please don't. Your reactions were quite normal. Drowning brings out the panic in the best of us."

The attempt at humor lay in the air between them, a small and pathetic little thing.

Spock turned then, and Kirk almost wished he hadn't. "I assure you, Captain, I did not panic."

Kirk could only stare at him, could not find the words to respond to the brutally calm Vulcan. He left for the one haven remaining to him.





The first shift wore on with no new reports of energy emanating from the planet. Kirk dispatched a landing party of sociologists and security men to try to determine the situation among the natives. After six hours, they returned and he met them in the main briefing room.

Still dressed in the homespun robes, Lt. Eve Stafford reported for the party. "We went to the main village, posing as a party of traders. There were only women and girl children. They told us the men were away in the hills, meditating."

"You say there were only girl children?" Kirk asked.

"Yes, sir. And when we tried to find out about the boys, the women became frightened and refused to answer."

"What about Veritas?"

"They said that he had been their religious leader for many years but that in the last few months, he had changed. Where before, he had been kind and caring, now he seems to be intent on controlling the people with fear. The women seemed to feel that some higher authority would soon act to remove him from his position of power."

Kirk canted his head in question. Stafford's dark eyes were amused. "I think they feel that the gods that control the volcanoes would cause them to come to life and get rid of Veritas."

"Are there any signs of volcanic activity?"

"Not at present, but the volcano closest to the village is only dormant, not extinct."

"Well, since we have no proof of any outside interference, at least for the moment, the Prime Directive is still in force. We'll continue monitoring the planet for another day or two and if we have any indication that there's anything going on, we'll go back down. For now, you're dismissed."

Kirk remained sitting at the briefing room table long after the others had left, feelings of anger and frustration building in him. At last, all he felt was weariness. Deciding against an early dinner, he left for his cabin, hoping to catch up on some much needed sleep.

Kirk struggled up from the deep sleep that had finally come after many hours of restless tossing. At last, full awareness brought the realization that his cabin was full of smoke. Rolling out of the bed onto the floor, he crawled, coughing and choking, toward his desk. Reaching up, he felt for the comm unit. There was no response. Dead. And there were no alarms, no indication that the automatic systems were aware of what was happening.

Still holding close to the floor, he reached the door. Quickly standing, he signalled for it to open. No response. Forcing himself to remain calm, he tried the emergency override. Still nothing. The thick smoke filled his lungs and he fought for every slight breath.

Dropping to his knees, he began pounding on the door, knowing that chances were slight that anyone would hear him. What could have happened? An attack on the ship? Where were the alarms? The questions faded with his consciousness.



"Jim? Jim! Can you hear me?" McCoy's concerned voice penetrated the darkness around him.

"What . . . " He choked, coughing and gasping even with the respirator pumping oxygen into his lungs.

"Don't try to talk. You're in sickbay and you're going to be fine. Good thing I insisted that M'Benga release me to my own quarters. I stopped by to see how you were doing. When I couldn't get an answer, I tried the override. When that didn't work, I called security and they got the door open."

He stopped as he looked up to see Scott hesitate in the doorway. "Come on in, Scotty. The captain is doing well. I don't think we'll even keep him overnight."

The engineer smiled and walked over to Kirk's side. "That's good news indeed, Doctor. I . . . wish I had better."

McCoy asked the question he knew Kirk was thinking. "Do you know what happened?"

"Well, there was no fire, no real damage to the cabin. T'was a chemical smoke, created in the air filtration system and pumped only into the captain's cabin. Also, the alarm systems and comm systems had been overridden on the computer so they wouldna work."

Kirk pulled the mask from his face. "You're saying that someone tried to kill me."

Scott nodded, his lips a grim line. "Aye, sir, so it would seem. Who or why, I canna say."

Kirk did not respond. Scott grew uneasy at the long silence and turned to leave. "Your cabin will be ready for ya, sir. Maintenance will see to that."

McCoy waited until he was out of earshot. "Jim . . . "

Kirk turned stricken eyes to the wall. "I can't believe it. I won't believe it."

He felt McCoy's gentle hand on his shoulder. "Who on board this ship would have the ability to sabotage your cabin like that? As hard as it may be, you have to face the facts!" McCoy demanded, then added to himself, I have to face them as well.

Kirk felt the solid reality of his life begin to slip away. Of all the things he could count on, Spock was the most basic. Had he gone mad, suffered some undetected injury on the planet? No reasons, no excuses presented themselves that he could hold onto to explain away the cold terror of betrayal that clawed at him.



The glow of the firepot warmed him not at all. He sat, cross-legged on the floor before it, shivering despite the heat of the room. For some hours, the power that was Veritas had all but left him. There remained only a mental shackle that tied them together, not allowing Spock to move, to leave his quarters and find Kirk. Somehow, he must get away before Veritas accomplished his evil plan.

Spock looked at hands, long slender fingers barely visible in the faint light of the firepot flame. These hands which had clasped Kirk's in friendship, had attempted to kill him -- twice. It was as if they were apart from him, not truly his as he could not control them or stop their trembling.

He focused his mind, attempting as he had several times in the past hours to construct some kind of mental barricade against Veritas' return.

Too late! The strength slammed into his mind, reclaiming control even as he fought against it. **You cannot escape from me, Spock. You will do as I tell you.**

Something was different, Spock felt. There was a sense of panic underlying the alien's words. Pushing outward from his small haven of safety, he "saw" images, perhaps bleeding over from Veritas' memory. The men of the planet, though weak in their mental ability, were beginning to resent the control of their minds that Veritas was exerting. And the women were beginning to exhort them more forcefully for the return of their sons. And above all, Veritas' domination was wavering. Spock shielded the wild hope that began to grow in him that he would be able to overcome and defeat the evil that controlled him.

As quickly as it came, the weakness left and Veritas drove a shaft of pain through Spock's mind. **Just a reminder, Vulcan. I control you! Never forget that! I grow weary of this game. You will go to his cabin and kill him. When it is done, I will bring you back to me and no one will know it was you.**

Spock clasped his hands over his ears, trying in vain to shut out the voice that clamored at him but it only increased in intensity until all rational thought was buried along with his will and any small shred of control he had carefully secreted away. There was only the voice that battered him over and over . . . .

"Spock! No! Please!"

The terrified plea that screamed in Kirk's mind came out a hoarse whisper. The Vulcan's hand holding him against his cabin wall had almost crushed his throat.

Kirk searched the dark eyes for some spark of recognition, some flash of memory that he could reach. But he found only madness and death. His hands pushed frantically, uselessly against Vulcan strength as the loss of oxygen drew him toward darkness. His eyes began to close.

"No, human! You will not die so easily!" The familiar deep voice taunted him and the hand against his throat relaxed somewhat, allowing more air to reach his burning lungs. And then he saw the dagger. One part of his mind recognized it: A ceremonial blade that had hung on the wall of Spock's cabin. His eyes moved from Spock's face to the rippled blade, glittering in the cabin light.

With one last, desperate gasp, he tried again.

"Why Spock? Why . . . are you . . . killing me?"

The hand holding his throat relaxed an infinitesimal bit more and the knife trembled ever so slightly. And for one brief moment, the dark eyes were aware and full of grief and despair.

"Jim?" he whispered, as if seeing Kirk for the first time. Then the look hardened once more and the dagger began its final descent to Kirk's heart.

Neither heard the cabin door slide open.

"Spock! My God, what are you doing?"

Beyond Spock's shoulder, Kirk could see McCoy's shocked face and then he could feel the struggle as McCoy sought to pull the Vulcan away. He might as well have tried to move a starship, but the attack did distract Spock enough for his hold on Kirk to loosen still more and when the knife plunged into Kirk's body, it missed its mark, if only by scant inches.

At first there was no pain, only the force of the blow against his chest. All three froze for an endless moment until red blood began to gush from the wound as Spock pulled the weapon free.

Kirk raised shocked eyes to Spock's face as darkness closed in. Only the Vulcan's hand holding him pinned against the wall like some mounted specimen kept him from falling.

"Spock . . . t'hy'la . . . " He was not even certain the words reached his lips. Spock released him then and Kirk could hear McCoy's voice as he fell.

"Let me help him, you son-of-a-bitch!"

"There is no help for any of us, doctor." The Vulcan's voice was deadly calm."

Spock must have stepped aside then for Kirk felt gentle hands turn him and McCoy's murmuring words of comfort blended into a non-sound that was the last thing he heard.



McCoy's hands were bright red with Kirk's blood as he slammed open the comm line.

"Sickbay! McCoy here! Priority one emergency! Captain's cabin! Now!"

He started to turn back but hesitated the briefest of moments to open another line.

"Bridge!"

"Bridge. Scott here."

"Scotty, the captain has been attacked by Mr. Spock. Find him and detain him immediately. I believe him to be insane and extremely dangerous."

He did not wait for Scott's reply and was only vaguely aware of the alarm being sent shipwide over the intercom. His entire being was given over to keeping Kirk alive.

Searching quickly, he found a small med-kit in Kirk's desk. He carefully packed the wound with pressure packs. Kirk moaned at the pain the treatment caused.

"I'm sorry, Jim. God, I'm so sorry. I should have seen this coming. I guess I didn't want to believe it any more than you did. Hold on, Jim. Please, just hold on!"

Seconds later, the cabin door opened and med-techs and nurses entered at a run. For the next hour, McCoy was on automatic: stretcher, corridor, sickbay, surgery. Only when he was certain Kirk, was out of danger, could he retire to his office to try to put the pieces together. Scotty was waiting for him.

McCoy sank gratefully into his desk chair. "Is Spock under restraint?"

The engineer shook his head. "He's gone. Transported back to the planet, though not by our transporter."

Even in his weariness, McCoy felt a thrill of shock. "Not our . . . then whose?"

"Unknown. We traced the power surge to a mountain near the village. There's a shield of some kind in place that we canna penetrate."

"Then the original readings were right, there is some alien presence down there. We have to find some way . . ."

"We're working on it, Leonard. How is the captain?"

McCoy wiped a hand over his weary face. "No permanent damage. The knife missed the heart, barely. He lost a lot of blood and right now, I'd have to call his condition critical, but I don't think that that cussed will to live of his will let him give up."

"Aye, that is good news. I'll pass it along to the crew, they've been worried about him."

"You do that. And keep me posted about Spock. You know that's the first question he's gonna ask when he wakes up."

Scott nodded agreement and left the office. McCoy slumped down in his chair and closed his eyes. The full impact of what had happened had been kept at bay by the nature of the emergency. Now, it hit him with the force of an ion storm. My god, Spock trying to kill Jim! How? Why? The answer had to lie beneath that force field on that planet below and somehow they had to find that answer. Worse than his own death, the pain of losing Spock to madness or the retribution of Starfleet's criminal system would destroy Kirk -- a loss that McCoy did not feel himself able to deal with.



Spock lay curled on his side where the transporter had left him. The hold on his mind had lessened once more and the full measure of his despair rocked him. Those last few moments aboard the ship played over and over in his mind as if he were viewing a tape on a continuous loop: The glint of the blade as it descended, the look in Kirk's eyes as they locked with his, a look of surprise and anticipated pain and love and forgiveness, and then the bright-red arterial blood pouring forth onto his hands. Spock raised his hands to see the brownish-red stains that would mark them forever, even when they were washed away.

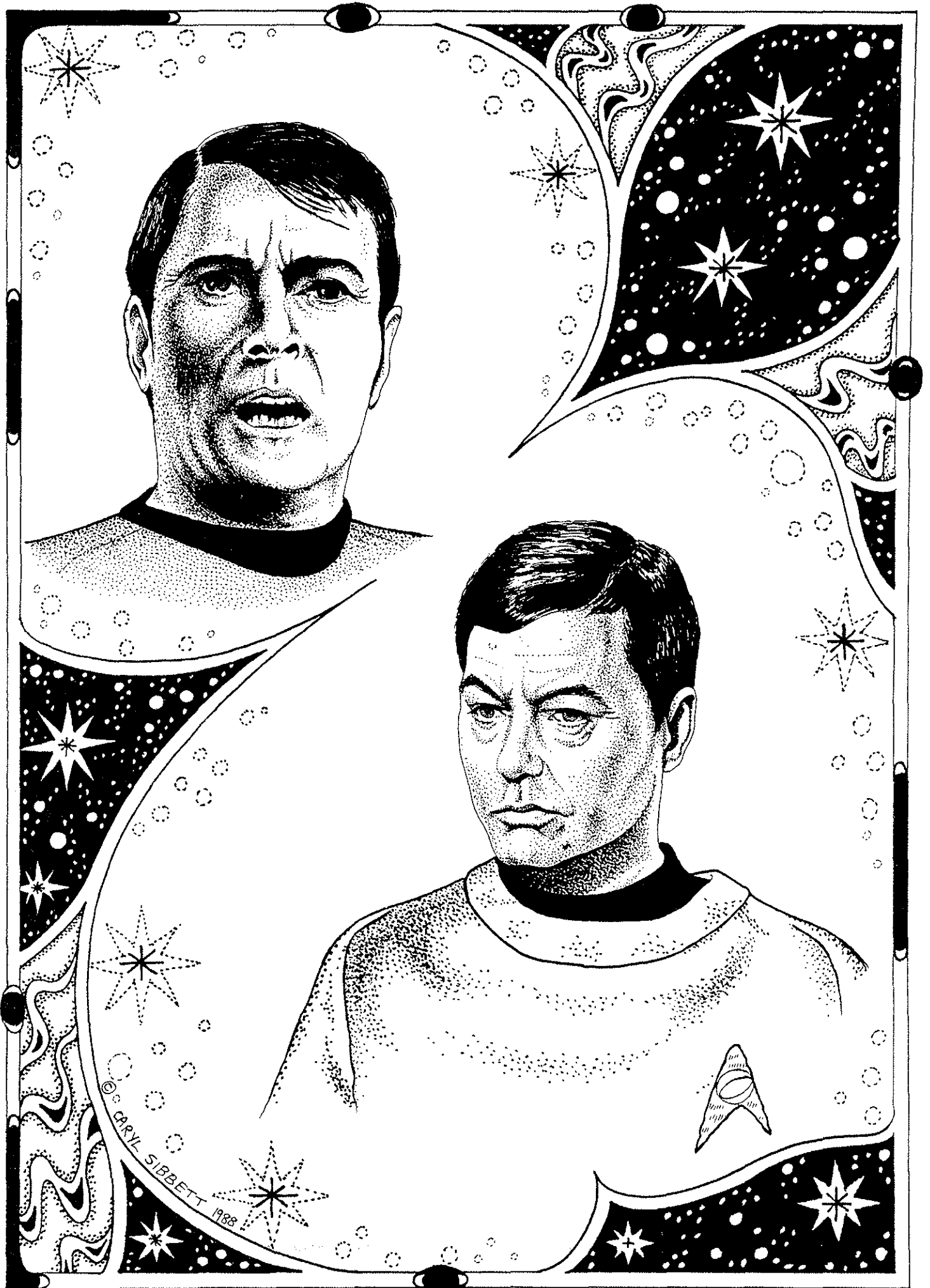
A hand clasped his shoulder and he looked up, startled. The group of boys surrounded him once more. He was back in the cave.

Spock sat up, drawing his legs up to his chest and buried his head against his knees. Suddenly, without warning, he felt a feather-light touch in his mind. Looking up, he was surprised to see the boys, holding hands in a circle around him. They dropped their hands and the touch was gone.

One, who looked to be the oldest, smiled shyly. "We've been practicing."

"Practicing? You are telepaths?"

"If you mean can we mind-talk, yes. A little. We have decided to try to put our minds together and maybe get out of here. Before he became evil, Veritas used to tell us that we all had great power in our minds if we could only learn how to use it." His face darkened with anger. "Now we want to use it against him!"



"Where is Veritas?"

"We think our fathers are at the Gathering Place, talking about getting rid of Veritas and he went there to try to stop them."

There was a sudden rumbling sound and the floor of the cave seemed to roll, then was still. Spock stood quickly and looked a question at the boy. "Veritas has been able to keep the fire mountain quiet with his power. Now, with our fathers turning against him, it's taking all his energy to deal with that. There's none left to control the mountain, too."

Spock was about to ask further questions when he looked up to see Veritas on the other side of the force field. The evil smile was back and the alien was in his mind, though not in control. You failed, Spock. The doctor knows it was you who killed the captain. No matter, we will wait. When they come down to look for you, as they most certainly will, I will inhabit your body again. Once aboard the ship, I will transfer to whoever is in command and still the ship will be mine.

Veritas moved away then and Spock's mind was free of him. He wrapped his arms around himself, suddenly cold. Perhaps the shock of what had happened was only now penetrating completely. Jim was dead, gone from his life forever and by his own hand. There could be no greater pain than that caused by what he had done and there was no way he could atone for what he had done except to be certain that Veritas would never have Jim's ship. The Enterprise would never belong to the malevolent Veritas, not if it took his own life to prevent it.



Kirk fought against the power that held him helpless, fought against the pain that burned in his chest and took his breath. Images flashed before him: A silver blade, a beloved face contorted in hatred -- Spock!

"Spock! No!" Strong hands held him down as he tried to rise and he struggled uselessly.

"Jim, open your eyes. Listen to me, Jim. It's Bones."

Kirk paused, letting the terrible memory recede and the reality of McCoy's voice calm him. It took a very great effort, but he opened his eyes.

"You're going to be fine, thanks to your old country doctor. It's just going to take some time and . . ."

"Where's . . . Spock?"

He saw McCoy's face take on a hurt and confused look. "I don't know, Jim. I wish to god I did. He tried to . . . kill you."

Kirk shook his head, too weak to engage in a debate with McCoy. Spock would never hurt him, not willingly, not if he was in his right mind. Fear turned to a cold knot in his stomach. Insanity! Worse than death for a Vulcan. But how? Why?



He read something in McCoy's face. "What . . . are you . . . keeping from me?"

The doctor sighed. Even in his critical state, Kirk could read him. "After he attacked you, something, or someone, transported Spock off the ship and back to the planet. Scotty has a fix on where the power originated from but there's a force field in place that the ship's sensors can't penetrate."

"We have to . . . go after him."

"There's no 'we' to it. You're not going anyplace and Scotty will take care of finding Spock. You almost died, in case you don't know it, and you certainly are not up to transporting down there to look for Spock. So get that notion out of your head right now."

Kirk closed his eyes wearily. Damn, he was so weak. Somehow, he had to find the strength to get out of sickbay and go after Spock.

"Tell Scotty . . . Prime Directive still in . . . place. Maybe we can get out of this without . . . doing any more damage than has been done. Whatever . . . has happened . . . the natives don't seem aware of any interference."

"All right, I'll tell him. Now, enough worrying about that planet. I want you to sleep and if you don't do it on your own, I'll give you a little help."

"No! That is . . . I promise, I'll rest." The last thing he wanted was for McCoy to sedate him. He would rest, but some part of him would be given over to finding a way to get to Spock. His fear for his friend was a stronger restorative than any McCoy could ever come up with.

Despite his plans, however, he was quickly asleep.



Spock's time sense told him that more than eighteen hours had passed since he had last seen Veritas. The volcanic stirrings beneath their feet began to occur with more frequency. The boys had eagerly listened to his words of instruction and, in turn, he had learned that there were other caves such as the one in which they were held -- other caves which held the rest of the male children of Galena.

"If we can . . . mind-talk to the others, perhaps we can effect an escape."

Intrigued, the children joined hands and Spock led them to a superficial level of his own mind. He felt the strength, though undisciplined, of the young minds and he felt the others, some distance away, as they joined in. It was like a concert of thought, each mind blending with the other and with his own, until there was only one song -- one symphony of pure energy.

McCoy had finally gone to rest in his own quarters, leaving Kirk for the first time since he was injured. Kirk feigned sleep until the nurse left to return to her station. Then, pulling a viewscreen to him, he retrieved the information he was seeking. He signalled the bridge.

"Bridge. This is the Captain."

"Lt. Masters, sir." Kirk pictured the earnest young man's face topped by a thatch of bright, red hair.

"Masters, I want the latest report on the situation on the planet."

"The force field is still in place, sir. But a funny thing. It . . . well, it wavers now and again."

"Wavers?" Kirk asked sharply.

"Yes, sir. Sort of fades in and out, but never goes completely."

Kirk paused, thoughts tumbling over one another in a mad rush. "When it wavers, are you able to get any kind of readings?"

"Only rudimentary, sir, but the volcanic activity appears to be getting stronger."

"What volcanic activity?" Kirk's roar might be a weak one, but it was definitely a roar.

"Well, as nearly as we can determine, that whole mountain is a volcano that is very close to becoming active."

Damn McCoy to hell! He had certainly managed to keep that bit of news to himself.

"Sir?" Masters voice pushed through his anger.

"Thank you, Lieutenant. Kirk out."

He sat up, trembling at the exertion, knowing with a sense of wild urgency that he had to get to Spock and, knowing that in his present condition, he would fall flat on his face.

Checking on the whereabouts of the nurse, he slipped quietly into McCoy's office. In the lower left-hand drawer of his desk, he found the pills: Stimulants that he knew McCoy kept for time when he had to be on his feet long after his body was telling him to quit. There were six in the small vial. Hopefully, it would be enough. He took two and left for his quarters. First he must change back into the native dress that he had left there and then he must transport down to Galena. He felt the pills begin to take effect as he made his way to his cabin. It was an artificial strength, but it was also all he had at the moment.

The young ensign on duty in the transporter room was sufficiently awed at the sight of his captain that he simply did as he was told and beamed Kirk to a deserted spot just outside the village. A ten minute walk brought him breathless and on the point of collapse into its center.

The women stood in the lengthening afternoon shadows in small, scattered groups talking quietly. They watched him warily for a moment, then went on with their discussions. Obviously, something more important than the visitor to their village was occupying their minds.

Kirk walked over to the nearest group. "Have you seen any strangers today?"

An old, toothless woman regarded him with narrowed eyes. "Only you," she responded shortly.

"Where are your men?" Kirk tried to keep his voice nonchalant and his legs from collapsing under him.

"The men are at the Gathering Place with Veritas, that is if he has dared to come out of his hiding place to face them," her voice trembled with rage.

"His hiding place?"

She raised a shaking hand, pointing to the nearby mountain. "There. Inside the fire-caves where we can no longer go, where he has taken our sons."

"Why can you no longer go there?"

"Veritas has cast a spell. When we try to approach, there is a wall of air that stops us."

The force field, Kirk knew. And inside the mountain must be where Veritas was keeping Spock as well as the children.

"Can you show me the way into the caves?"

She regarded him suspiciously. "Why do you want to know?"

"I have seen men such as Veritas in my own country. Perhaps I can find a way to help you."

"What can one man alone do?" another woman asked.

Kirk wiped the sweat from his face and tried to ignore the weakness that pulled at him. "Perhaps nothing. But if a man does not try, he will never know for certain what he might have been able to do."

The women exchanged looks and seemed to come to some unspoken agreement.

"Come, we will show you."

Kirk let them lead the way and once out of the village, covertly slipped two more of the pills into his mouth. They left a bitter taste, not unlike the fear that he

tasted as well. He had only a short time to gain entrance to the caves and find Spock before Veritas returned. He felt that if he could get him out of the caves and back to the rendezvous point, Scotty would certainly be scanning for them by then. There were a lot of "ifs", none of which offered him any comfort.

The women left him at the bottom of the mountain, indicating a well-worn path up its side. Kirk stood looking up, wondering if he would be able to complete the climb, yet knowing he had to. He reached out a tentative hand but encountered no barrier. Maybe his famous luck would hold just one more time.

He started up the mountain.

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Spock was hard-pressed to control the young minds. They reveled in their new-found power, and the joy at simply sharing their thoughts tore at him. Once, he had shared such joy with Jim. But that would never be again. Now, he had only one purpose: find Veritas and stop him, whatever the cost to himself. He knew what he wanted that cost to be.

Forcing himself back to the task at hand, he instructed the boys, **Focus! Think only of the doors to your prisons! Concentrate! They are not real; they do not exist!**

He looked toward the curtain of blue light that blocked the entrance to the cell. It began to fade and flicker. He could see in his mind that it was the same in the other cells. The floor beneath him shook with more violence than it had previously. Distracted, the boys lost their concentration and the field strengthened again. Frustration welled in him and he began to build the links between them. This time, it was easier. **We have to get out of here. Without Veritas to control the mountain, it will erupt. Hurry! Focus!**

Spock watched the doorway and saw the light fade to nothing. They were free! He turned to the eldest boy. "Gather all the children and take them to your village."

The boy looked at him in alarm. "But Veritas will find us and punish us."

Veritas will never harm anyone again, I promise you." He heard the coldness and anger in his voice and did not reject it. "Now, do as I say."

Still the boy held his ground. "We will help you," he said. "We are strong."

Strong, Spock thought, looking around the group of young, eager faces. Strong as young reeds before a bursting dam.

Pulling himself to a stance of near-attention, Spock nodded to the youth before him. "I am honored, but I cannot accept your help. Your duty lies with getting the children back to your village. Mine lies in making certain that my promise to you is kept."

The young, dark-eyed boy stared at the Vulcan for a moment longer, then began herding the children through the narrow, winding cave, toward a light, freedom and home.

Spock made to follow them when he saw a lone figure approaching in the darkened tunnel. It was not Veritas for he felt no grappling for his mind. The figure dressed in the long, tan robe seemed to stumble and nearly fall, then leaned against the wall for a moment, and started forward again.

And Spock knew. He could not seem to breathe and a cold wave of disbelief washed over him. It was not possible. His hand covered his mouth as if to hold back the cry of joy that climbed his throat. It could not be. Hot tears built in his eyes and he had no strength of will to hold them back. Somehow, he forced his legs to move and covered the last steps that separated him from the figure.

"Jim . . . I . . . " He could not continue. He could only absorb Kirk with his eyes, drink in the reality of the sandy hair and hazel eyes and lopsided grin.

Kirk reached out a hand and grasped his arm. "A Vulcan at a loss for words? Who would've believed it?"

There was a quite gentleness in the teasing tone that reached through Spock's anguish and let hope be reborn. Then, the floor seemed to buckle and both were thrown violently to the ground. Kirk could not quite stifle a moan of pain. Spock got to his knees and lifted Kirk into his arms. Before he could speak, the power of Veritas slammed into his mind and was forced to abandon all thoughts of his friend to attempt the fight that was upon him.

He sensed that the alien's mind was weaker and he focused on that weakness and pushed at it with all the strength he could summon.

Looking up, he watched Veritas approach. He walked leisurely, insolently up to them. What a touching sight. Say good-bye, Spock. Here is where you leave your captain. I will have your mind — and your body. Now!

From somewhere, Spock found his voice. "Jim! Get out of here!" The Vulcan released his hold on Kirk and stood, facing Veritas.

"I won't leave you, Spock. I . . . can't leave . . . "

Spock looked down. Kirk lay on the ground, the front of his robe soaked in the same bright red blood that had stained the Vulcan's hands. Anger flared anew in Spock's heart and mind. He turned the power of that anger against Veritas and the alien was driven back. Then the trembling of the ground began in earnest and the smell of sulphur filled the air.

Stop fighting me, Spock. Give in and I will save him.

The lie was not even a good one. If you do not, this whole mountain will erupt and we will all die.

Spock wavered. If he continued to fight Veritas, the volcano would kill them as well as the villagers. He had killed Kirk once, he would not do so again. Spock relaxed his mind and stopped fighting.

Kirk gasped at the look of triumph on the alien's face.

"Spock! What are you doing?"

The Vulcan knelt once more beside him. "If I give him what he wants, he will stop the eruption. No one will die."

Kirk's face was white with pain and sweat made streaks through the grime that covered his face. "Only you. You . . . can't . . . please . . . "

Spock allowed himself one last time to touch his friend, reaching his hand to lay it gently on the beloved cheek. Then, he stood and prepared to complete his bargain, body rigid, hands clenched into fists at his sides.

Veritas threw back his head and laughed, a triumphant evil sound that echoed off the cavern walls. Suddenly, without warning, the laugh turned into a scream of pain and the alien dropped to his knees, clutching his head.

"Spock? What's . . . happening?" Kirk whispered raggedly.

"Unknown. But whatever it is . . . " He did not complete the thought. Reaching down, he lifted Kirk into his arms and made for the tunnel entrance. Veritas' screams followed after him, reverberating over and over in a chorus of agony.

At the entrance, Spock stopped to rest a moment. The moon had risen and in its light, he saw the answer. The children stood ranged in a semicircle at the cave entrance, holding hands. Their eyes were focussed on a distant place and Spock shivered as he saw the smiles of triumph on each young face.

The mountain shook again. "You must leave here! The volcano will soon erupt!"

As if to prove his point, the tunnel behind him collapsed with a roar, dust and debris blowing out of the mouth around them. The children appeared satisfied and, dropping hands, began to quickly descend the mountain.

Spock looked down, cold fear gripping him. Kirk was unconscious, face white, lips blue. He was barely breathing. They were free of Veritas but if they did not return to the ship immediately, their victory would be a hollow one indeed.

Stumbling, straining to retain his balance, he made his way down the mountain and headed for the rendezvous point near the village. Reaching the safety of some large boulders, he sat, finally exhausted, and held Kirk close while the spectacular sight of the volcano's fury filled the night's sky. Flames roared from the top of the mountain, rocks and dust rained down. He leaned over to cover Kirk's body with his own, sheltering him with the only protection he could offer. It was then that he discovered that Kirk was not breathing. It was then that the transporter took them.

Spock looked up from the still form in helpless despair as Scott came to his side from the control panel.

"Dr. McCoy is on the way." He knelt beside them, his hand reaching for his captain but stopping short and falling uselessly to his side.

"He is not breathing," Spock said, more to himself than Scott.

"Then breath for him, man!"

The simplicity of Scott's words reached inside the grey wall of shock that surrounded him and his Starfleet training took over. He straightened Kirk's body and tilted his head back, clearing the air passage. Covering Kirk's mouth with his own, he began the measured, careful breaths. In, out, in, out. Everything around him faded into nothingness; all that mattered was pushing the breath of life into Kirk, forcing back death with each exhalation of air. When McCoy tried to take his place, he would not -- could not relinquish it.

"Mr. Spock, let the doctor help him." Again, it was Scott's calm, rational voice that reached him and he allowed McCoy to take his place.

Scott tried to lead him out of the transporter room but he stood immovable, watching, waiting, until McCoy looked up.

"He's breathing on his own, Spock. He's in shock, lost a lot of blood, but I think he's going to be all right."

Spock left then. Going to his cabin, he sat down on his bunk, too numb even to remove the bloodstained robe. He was still sitting in the same position two hours later when McCoy came to his door.

"I signalled. Didn't you hear me?"

Spock looked up. "No. I . . . did not. Jim?"

McCoy smiled. "He's fine. Weak as a kitten and still smarting from the tongue lashing I gave him for pulling such a damn fool stunt, but give him a few days and he'll be chomping at the bit to get out of sickbay."

Spock could only nod, still unable to pull himself out of the morass of despair that claimed him.

The doctor spoke again. "He wants to see you."

That finally brought him to his feet. "Yes, I must present myself to him. Regulation requires . . ."

What in the hell are you talking about? Present yourself? For what, pray tell?"

"I attempted to kill the Captain."

When McCoy did not answer, Spock finally looked at him. The doctor's face was unreadable. "Yes, you did or so it appeared. At the time, I think I could have killed you. But now I know that it was the alien controlling your mind. You could not help yourself, Spock. You need to accept that . . . for yourself."

Spock shook his head and marched toward the door. "I should have been stronger. For him."

[REDACTED]

Kirk lay so quiet and still that for a moment Spock was back on the transporter pad. He shivered at the memory. Then, the hazel eyes opened and the crooked grin made a halfhearted attempt to appear. The breath of life breathed on.

"Spock." There was such love, such acceptance in the singular way that Kirk said his name that he could almost forget for a moment how undeserving he was of that love.

He straightened his shoulders, clasping his trembling hands behind his back.

"Sir, I hereby present myself to you and surrender myself to whatever punishment you might deem fit to . . . "

"Spock, what are you saying?"

He could not allow himself to look at Kirk. If he did, all semblance of resolve would leave him.

"I attempted to kill you, Captain. At the very least, assaulting a fellow officer is . . . "

"Spock, what happened was not your fault. Veritas, or whoever he was, controlled your mind. It was he who tried to kill me, not you."

Spock turned away and walked to the end of the bed. "That is true. But, if I had been stronger . . . "

The gentle voice followed him. "We will always be as strong for each other as possible, and when it isn't enough, well, I guess we'll just have to live with that somehow. It's an imperfect universe, Spock, but it's the only one we have."

He turned back then, wanting to accept Kirk's words but not quite able to completely. "I betrayed you."

Kirk smiled and Spock felt the warmth of that smile light his heart. "You could never betray me. I know that even if you don't. There was simply something stronger



than you were. It's happened before and it will probably happen again. That's not betrayal, my friend, that's just the way of things."

Spock swallowed hard and smiled the small smile that only Kirk was allowed to see. "Thank you, Jim."

Kirk nodded and closed his eyes. "You're quite welcome, Mr. Spock. Now, since McCoy seems bent on keeping me here, I expect you to take good care of my ship until I make good my escape."

"Yes, Captain, I shall endeavor to do so."

"Might I suggest a change of uniform first?" He saw that Kirk was peeking at him through half-closed eyes.

"An excellent suggestion, sir," Spock replied with mock seriousness. He left for his quarters then, knowing that the stains he had thought to be permanent could now be washed away.

# WHALESONGS

There is a music within us all.  
Every creature's heart beat pulsates with it.  
Songs of love, of fear, of devotion.

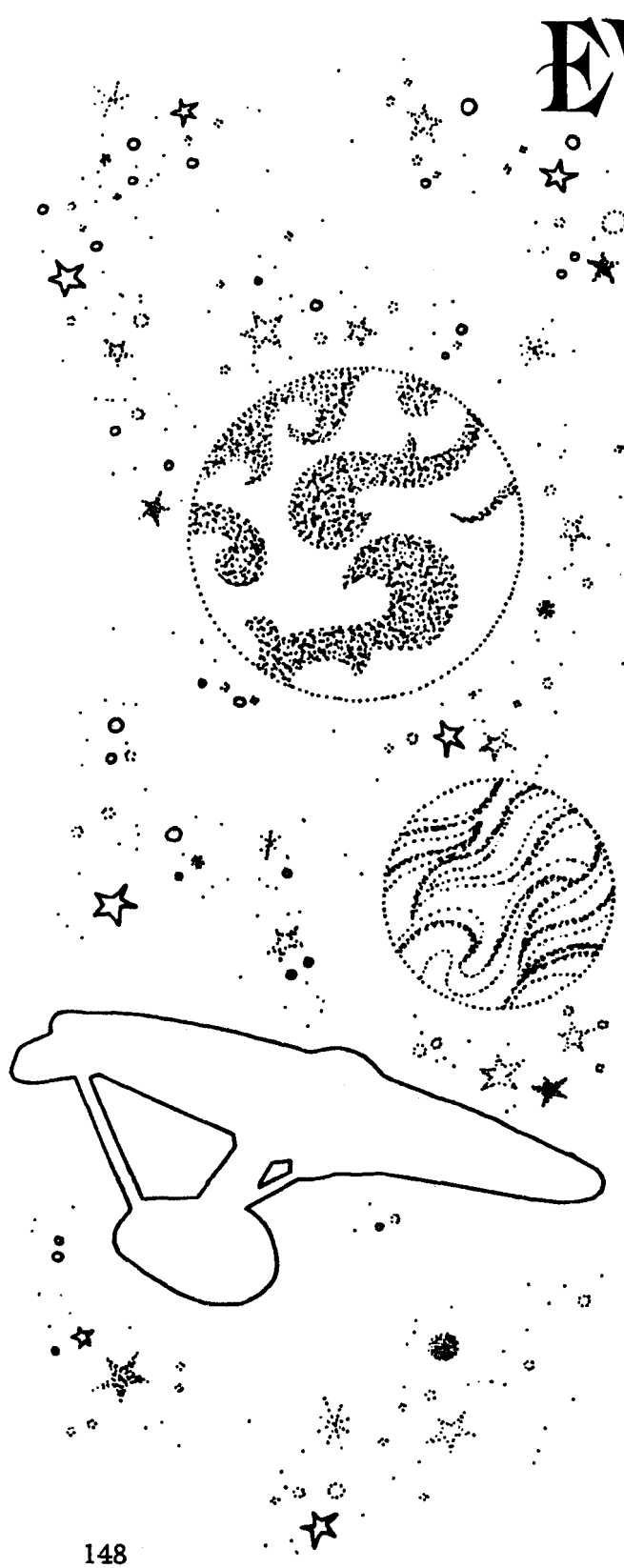
Some themes are hauntingly beautiful,  
In their simplicity. Others, harsh and shrill.  
Yet each unique, most assuredly worth preserving.

The whale calls to its mate,  
Speaks a language alien to us,  
Melodic messages, mournful music.

Who are we to judge its quality?  
And who are we to make light of its loss,  
In sorrowful, senseless destruction?

- by Cheryl Resnick

# STOPPING BY AN UNKNOWN GALAXY ON A ROTTEN EVENING



What stars these are we do not know.  
They are not in the starcharts, though;  
It seems we've lost our way again,  
Becalmed amidst their alien glow.

The *Enterprise* must think it strange  
To fly so far from our home range --  
If ships can think, I mean -- but now  
It may not matter anyhow.

We jumped here accidentally  
While testing our new drive, you see;  
And now it seems we're lost once more  
Along this unfamiliar shore.

It may be some new universe,  
Far out beyond our own; or worse;  
An alternate reality:  
A new threat for the crew and me.


Spock says that there is little doubt  
We simply have to figure out  
How to get back to our own home.

If not, we may be doomed to roam  
Forever through the endless night.  
(The trouble is, he's always right.)

For jumping here has warped our drive,  
And Scotty swears it canna thrive  
Without some new dilithium.

'Twill blow us all to kingdom come,  
Unless he can repair its thrust.  
We may become atomic dust,  
Mere cosmic specks that float through space  
Without alighting any place.

*By: Flora Poste    Border by: Shellie Whild*



(I wouldn't wish that on a Gorn.  
That's why I'm feeling so forlorn.)

Uhura's signals reach no ear,  
For no one knows we're lost out here,  
Wherever **here** is. Though we call,  
There still is no reply at all.

Lieutenant Chekov tends to shout  
And scream a lot. An angry clout  
(From Yeoman Rand) was his reward  
For tripping over Sulu's sword  
When Sulu drew it on himself  
The weapon's back upon the shelf,  
Unbloodied: Sulu did confess  
That he's to blame for this fine mess.

My sentiments are not humane,  
And Bones says Sulu was insane  
To trifle with our molecules,  
And break the navigation rules  
When he committed this offense.

Some day -- I hope it's not ages hence --  
I guess we'll remember this with a sigh.  
That's what Spock says, and that we should try  
Learning from Sulu's experience.

So far, the lesson's at our expense:  
From all the roads through the starry sky,  
He chose the one least traveled by,  
And that -- damn it! -- made all the difference.

# OR, THE ROAD MIS-TAKEN



# ANALYSIS OF A

## FRIENDSHIP

Ah, doctor  
you return once more with dry wit  
to poke and prod,  
as you so eloquently put it,  
at what dwells beneath my Vulcan mask.  
Being what I am,  
I answer in kind,  
as if to protect or defend myself.

I cast my mind back  
to the time when I first discovered  
the warmth behind your acid wit.  
In every word you spoke  
you revealed, not bias and dislike  
as I and nearly everyone else,  
with the exception of Jim, heard,  
but deep affection and friendship  
even you refused to admit.

A startling discovery indeed  
even for a scientist of my experience.  
More disturbing still  
was to discover the same emotions  
for an illogical, irrational human  
dwelling beneath my stoic pose.  
That discovery allowed you the first  
of your treasured "last words".

Being the man I am  
and curiosity being the one emotion  
no Vulcan can control,  
I could not allow such a discovery  
to pass without analysis.  
How had matters come to such a pass?

My admiration for Jim is easily explained.  
He can be, and often is, eminently logical.  
There is much to admire in a commander  
such as he.  
Mr. Scott, Sulu, Uhura, even Chekov,  
I acknowledge as excellent officers  
and, although seldom voiced,  
I admit to respect for them.

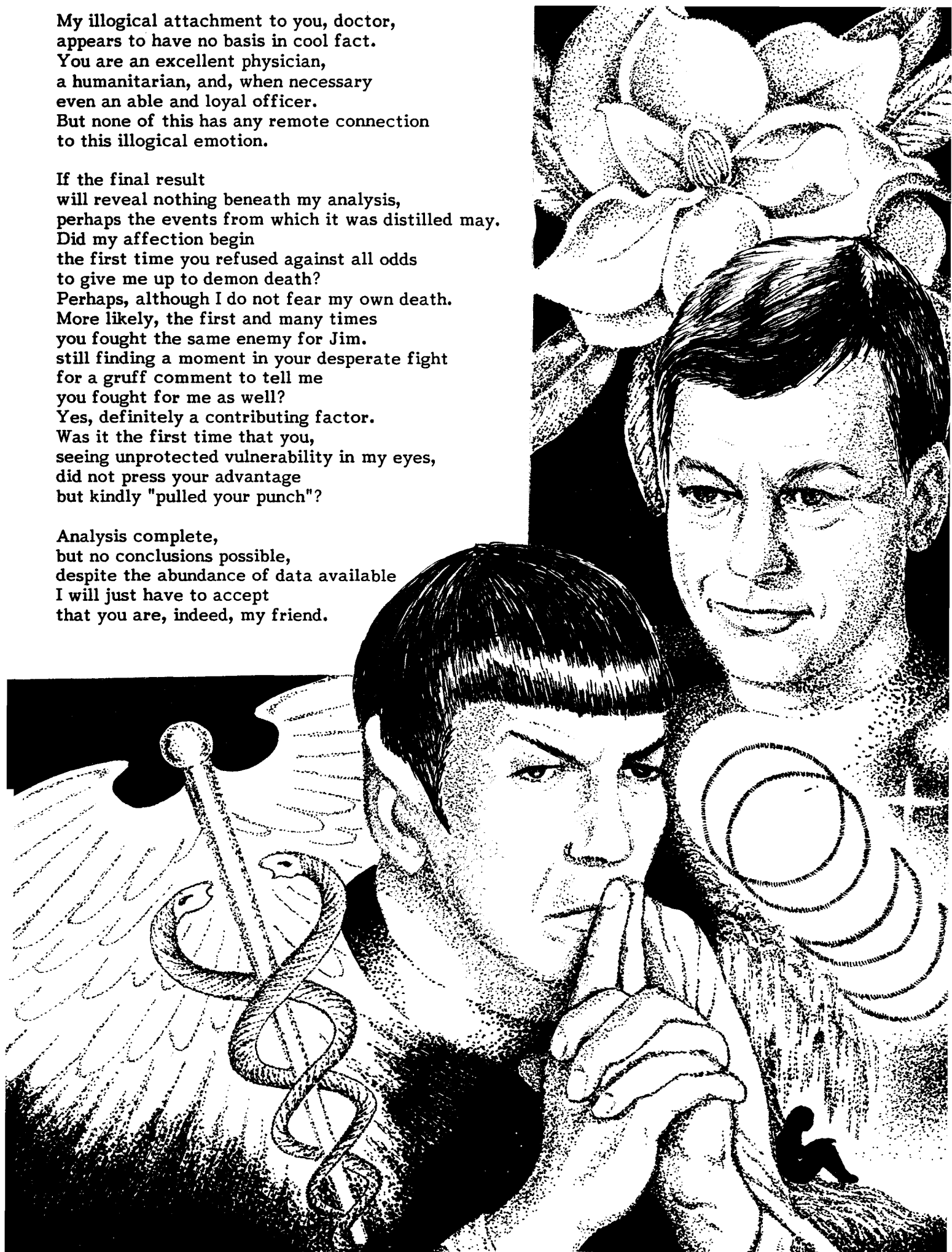
By: D.A. Martin

Art by: Bev Zuk

My illogical attachment to you, doctor,  
appears to have no basis in cool fact.  
You are an excellent physician,  
a humanitarian, and, when necessary  
even an able and loyal officer.  
But none of this has any remote connection  
to this illogical emotion.

If the final result  
will reveal nothing beneath my analysis,  
perhaps the events from which it was distilled may.  
Did my affection begin  
the first time you refused against all odds  
to give me up to demon death?  
Perhaps, although I do not fear my own death.  
More likely, the first and many times  
you fought the same enemy for Jim.  
still finding a moment in your desperate fight  
for a gruff comment to tell me  
you fought for me as well?  
Yes, definitely a contributing factor.  
Was it the first time that you,  
seeing unprotected vulnerability in my eyes,  
did not press your advantage  
but kindly "pulled your punch"?

Analysis complete,  
but no conclusions possible,  
despite the abundance of data available  
I will just have to accept  
that you are, indeed, my friend.



# MIND CANNIBALS

*By: Sharon Pillsbury  
Art by: Fiona Graves*

The fight in the bar on Rigel started quickly, with James Kirk right in the middle. The place was suddenly jammed with a hundred outraged brawlers swinging their fists and shouting, as beer mugs were launched into the air -- aimed at any head available. Before Kirk had time to wonder what had started the altercation, he found himself hit hard in the ribs, knocking his breath away. He looked for McCoy or Scotty, but could see neither of them in the crowd.

Kirk felt himself being pulled roughly from behind as another blow landed in his ribs. In spite of the noise of the fight, he could hear his ribs crack. His left arm was pulled tightly behind his back as he felt himself being dragged toward the back door. He quickly turned to his right and swung his other arm outward, landing a blow in the attacker's face.

He then found himself being held by another man, then pushed toward the door at the back. Starlight surrounded him as he was thrust into an alley, two large aliens hovering over him. One was bleeding profusely from his nose and mouth.

"Lucky hit, human!" the man growled as he pounded his fists into Kirk. The captain fought back as hard as he could, though he knew the situation was hopeless. He was already injured and the aliens were incredibly strong. If only Scotty or McCoy . . .

One of the men again grabbed Kirk's arm, pulling it until he felt it break. The other continued his pounding. A strong blow to his ribs caused Kirk to fall to the ground.

"Is he unconscious?" Kirk could barely make out the words through his pain. He felt his face being touched.

"Damn right he is. He surprised me. For a human, he can sure take a lot!"

"Remember, this is no ordinary human. Give me the hypo."

Kirk heard the sound of a hypo press into his arm with a quiet hiss. He lay still, not daring to move.

"We've done well. The Emperor will be pleased."

"Let's get out of here before someone comes." Their footsteps moved quickly away, leaving Kirk alone and barely conscious. He tried to move, but the slightest motion caused him agony.

There was something about those men. Something . . .

It was their last few words, he suddenly realized. They had started out speaking Standard, but had ended by speaking Klingonese!

Kirk drifted into unconsciousness.



Kirk fought hard to open his eyes as a gentle voice intoned, "Take it easy, Jim. You're safe now."

With a great deal of effort, he forced both eyes open. It seemed to take all his strength. "Bones," he said weakly.

"Don't talk just yet," the doctor cautioned. "You took a pretty bad beating. You've been unconscious for two days." McCoy gently lifted the captain's head and put a cup of water to his lips. "Just take some sips. Real easy."

Kirk obeyed, then lay back in exhaustion as McCoy lowered his head onto the pillow. "Why?" the captain whispered.

"We don't know who did this or why. The authorities on Rigel are investigating."

All of a sudden, Kirk remembered. His eyes grew bright with alarm as he exclaimed, "Klingons! They were Klingons!"

"Whoa there, Jim-boy! Take it easy. There are no Klingons this far into Federation territory."

"They were Klingons!" Kirk insisted. "They gave me an injection of some type."

"What are you talking about? They drugged you?"

"I don't know. I heard the hypo, Bones!"

"Take it easy, Jim. I'll check it out," McCoy promised. The wildness in his captain's eyes vanished, leaving only a look of total exhaustion. Kirk closed his eyes, and dropped into a restless sleep.

McCoy brushed the stray lock of hair back from Kirk's forehead. His friend was hurting pretty damn bad. He sure would like to get hold of whoever did this to him! Klingons? On Rigel? McCoy walked away from Kirk and called into the next room, "Chris, I need you. We're gonna run some more tests."

X

"I don't know, Spock. Jim is still insistent that he was attacked by Klingons and given some kind of shot. I've run every kind of test. There's no sign of anything."

"Dr. McCoy, the captain is not given to fits of imagination. If he says he was attacked by Klingons, I believe him," Spock stated matter-of-factly.

"Damn it, man! Listen to me!" McCoy exclaimed in exasperation. "I'm having enough trouble with Jim without giving in to his hallucinations! He was beaten half to death, left with severe internal injuries -- not to mention that his arm was broken as well as almost every rib. Under those conditions, anyone would be given to 'fits of imagination'!"

"Perhaps, Doctor. I will again discuss it with Captain Kirk."

"There's no discussion. He's absolutely convinced. I've told him repeatedly that there's no sign of any drug in his body . . . but he's so damn stubborn!"

"I shall see him now." Spock rose from the desk in McCoy's office.

The doctor got up with him. "Okay, Spock. Just don't encourage him." The doctor led the way into sickbay. He approached Kirk's bed quietly. He was so still that McCoy thought his patient was asleep.

The eyelids fluttered open and pain-filled hazel eyes regarded the two men. "Spock?" Kirk said in a voice, still weak.

The Vulcan stood next to Kirk and lightly touched his shoulder. "You are stronger today?"

"Yeah, Spock. Ready to take on the world. When can I get up, Bones?"

"When you get smart enough not to try to take on the world -- or two days, whichever comes first."

"Two days!" Kirk struggled to sit up.

"Will you just hold still and be quiet, Jim," McCoy ordered, pushing him back down.

"Indeed, Captain." Spock agreed. "The more rest you get, the sooner you will be able to return to the bridge."

"Did you find out anything about the Klingons, Spock?"

"There have been no Klingons reported on Rigel," Spock replied

"Jim, I've explained this to you before," McCoy interrupted. "You were almost unconscious and the unconscious mind is a tricky thing. You were hallucinating."



"They gave me a drug, damn it!" Kirk insisted.

"There's no drug in your body."

Kirk's expression changed to one of disbelief. "They used a hypo on me! I'm not imagining it!"

"Jim . . . "

Kirk turned away from his friends, the movement causing him to gasp with pain.

"Do you understand what being still means?" McCoy asked, his gaze resting worriedly on the pain register on the diagnostic panel.

"Just leave me alone," Kirk whispered as his eyes closed.



"New orders, Captain," Spock announced as Kirk entered the bridge. The Vulcan noted that he was fifteen minutes late for duty - a rare occurrence.

"Yes, Mr. Spock?"

"We are to proceed to Benecia Colony to pick up and transport Ambassadors Zarn and M'Laya to Starbase 12."

"Benecia is a week away and Starbase 12 is another week!" Kirk protested. "What's going on?"

"Starfleet is being somewhat close mouthed," Uhura volunteered. "But I heard through my sources on Benecia that Zarn and M'Laya had a big falling out. They're headed for Starbase 12 to take their differences up with Admiral Komack."

"And regular transport won't do?"

"Not for them," she replied.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Kirk sighed. "Mr. Spock, make for Benecia."

"Course already plotted. Mr. Sulu, warp 3."

"Warp 3, sir."

Kirk smiled at the efficiency of his crew. He walked to the command chair and sat down tiredly, rubbing his hand over his eyes. Spock was immediately at his side.

"Are you all right, Captain?" the Vulcan asked softly. He could not fail to notice the dark circles under his friend's eyes or the pale complexion.

"I'm fine, Mr. Spock. Just a little tired. Had some trouble sleeping." Spock fought to keep the worried look off his face as he walked back to his science station.

In one hour and 45 minutes he was due for a break. He would go to see McCoy. It was time the doctor gave the captain another checkup.



"I said I'm okay. Why are you so determined to think that I'm not?" Kirk asked, his voice rich with frustration.

"Because half the crew seems resolved to bring it to my attention that you're not!" McCoy returned. "You don't look very good, Jim."

"Thanks."

"Want to tell me the problem?"

Kirk hesitated, then took a deep breath. He looked shyly downward as he stammered, "I . . . I haven't felt real well since Rigel."

"That's understandable. It's only been a few weeks. Your body takes time to heal."

"It's not that! I . . . just don't feel well."

"What do you mean, Jim? Are you in pain?"

Kirk looked at the doctor, embarrassment showing in his face. "No. I just don't feel . . . right. And I have some problems sleeping."

"C'mon, Jim. Tell me," McCoy coaxed. "What problems?"

Kirk walked over to one of the diagnostic beds and sat down. Standing tired him.

McCoy strolled over to Kirk and began gently kneading his shoulders. "Relax a little," he ordered. "This isn't a grill. Just tell me about it."

Kirk gazed at the doctor timidly. He did not like to admit to illness. "Nightmares, I guess."

"You guess?"

"I can't really remember them too clearly."

"What do you remember?" McCoy continued to rub Jim's shoulders, feeling the tense muscles relax under his ministrations.

"I think I dream about Klingons."

"Tell me more."

"That's all I can remember. Sorry." He looked at McCoy apologetically.

"Well, okay. But if you remember more, will you tell me?" Kirk nodded. "Now, I want you to stretch out on the bed. A few more tests." Kirk groaned in protest. "After that, I'm gonna give you some of my special little red pills. You'll sleep."

McCoy used his scanner as well as the diagnostic panel. He was not surprised when the tests indicated perfect health. He had run these tests before.

So what was wrong . . . and why the nightmares?



"Ready to beam down, Mr. Spock?" Kirk asked as he entered the transporter room.

"Quite ready, Captain," the Vulcan replied. "I have already set up the schedule for the various shore leave parties."

"I trust you left the coordination in Uhura's capable hands?"

"Indeed, Captain."

"And you, Scotty?" Jim nodded at the man behind the transporter controls. "Will you be taking shore leave?"

"No, Captain. The leave on Rigel about did me in," Scott confessed, then looked ashamed, remembering what his captain had gone through on that planet. He quickly gained his composure and added, "I'm real surprised that Starfleet granted us another shore leave so soon."

"Me too," Kirk smiled at the engineer. "But Benecia is an ideal place for it -- and we do have two days to kill before we take the ambassadors aboard." The captain stepped onto the transporter pad, next to his first officer.

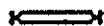
"That last leave was a little . . . active, Scotty," Kirk stated. "If you can get away from your technical journals, a day or two of rest might do some good."

"I'll give it some thought, Captain."

"Energize." Scotty pulled the levers and watched as Kirk and Spock vanished. He shook his head, perplexed.

So the captain thought Scotty could use some rest. He had better be thinkin' about himself! The lad looked downright haggard, and it was plain to see he wasn't feeling well. Scotty shook his head again and sighed. Better mention something to Leonard again. It would mean that the doctor would start rantin' about the ship being full of 'mother' hens' and that the captain was fine -- just fine.

It didn't matter. Scotty could plainly see that Kirk wasn't 'fine'.



"It would be to everyone's advantage if you would save your disagreements until Starbase 12," Kirk announced to the two ambassadors, Zarn and M'Laya. "You've been arguing your personal differences for over two hours and you've gotten nowhere." Kirk felt a headache begin to nag. He hoped fervently that it wasn't a migraine.

"The captain is correct. Admiral Komack has already agreed to hear your grievances," Spock pointed out. "There is little purpose in continuing this discussion."

"I quite agree," M'Laya said. "Zarn is most argumentative." Her skin changed from dark purple to a light lavender as her mood changed.

"I protest!" Zarn shouted. "She cannot speak about me in such a manner! Kirk, I wish to leave here and go to your ship at once! The sooner we get to Starbase 12, the sooner I will be free of this . . . person!"

"Ambassadors! Ambassadors!" Kirk interrupted, holding his hand out as though to physically stop their arguing. "You're both welcome to come aboard my ship at any time. However, Starfleet has granted us two days' leave time and I intend to see that my crew takes full advantage."

Spock watched as his captain drew back his hand and began to rub his forehead. Kirk had good reason for a headache. The two ambassadors were impossible when in each other's company.

"I suggest that we end this discussion now," Spock stated, hoping to take a little pressure off Kirk. "Do you wish to beam up to our ship now, Zarn?"

"Unquestionably. Being hundreds of miles away from M'Laya fills me with joy!"

"Not as much joy as I feel at the prospect!" M'Laya returned.

Spock got to his feet, flipping open his communicator. "Spock to Enterprise. Mr. Kyle."

"Kyle here."

"Beam Ambassador Zarn to the ship immediately."

Spock reached down a hand and pulled Kirk up from his seat on the floor. "Do you wish to return to the ship, Captain?"

"And waste both of our leaves, Mr. Spock?" Kirk smiled. "No. I'm for seeing the town. Ambassadors?" he inclined his head toward them. "I shall see you in two days."

Kirk walked swiftly from the room, hoping not to appear rude. The hum of the transporter beam sounded behind him. Spock quickly caught up with his captain. They exited the embassy and were immediately swallowed up in the crowded street.

"Well, Spock. Where to?"

"Wherever you wish, Captain. This is, after all, your shore leave."

"Yours, too," Kirk pointed out, trying to keep his voice light. He had a raging headache, but wasn't about to give into it . . . or let Spock know about his problem.

"Perhaps we should endeavor to find some place quiet," Spock suggested. "The solitude may ease your headache."

Kirk looked at the Vulcan in surprise. "Am I that readable?"

Spock's mouth turned slightly upward at the corners. "There is a most interesting museum here, I have heard," he said, ignoring Kirk's question. "I believe it is this direction."

"Lead the way."

They never noticed the men following them.



After an hour, Kirk felt much better. The two ambassadors had been nothing short of insufferable, and he intended to keep his distance from them for the six days they would be on the ship.

Although Kirk found the museum vaguely interesting, he was becoming increasingly restless. An hour of artifacts was as much as he needed. He walked over to where Spock was seated. The Vulcan was intently studying the holoviewer, which was a showpiece of Benecian history.

"Spock?" Kirk asked, then tapped the Vulcan lightly on the shoulder when he did not respond.

Spock looked somewhat startled. "I did not hear your approach, Jim."

Kirk smiled. "No. I doubt if you'd have heard an army of Orion Battrams! Is that stuff that interesting?"

"Yes," Spock replied, glancing back at the viewer. Kirk knew his friend disliked interruptions when studying. The Vulcan was obviously anxious to get 'back to work'.

"Okay, Spock. Go ahead and enjoy yourself. I think I'll just go over to that bookstore we spotted across the street and browse awhile."

"I shall accompany you."

"No need, Spock. You go ahead and study Benecian history. Join me when you're finished." The Vulcan looked at his friend in concern. "Don't worry," Kirk assured. "I'm all right."

Kirk left the Vulcan seated at the viewer as he strolled out of the museum and into the crowded street. He carefully made his way into the bookstore and immediately appreciated the quietness of the place.

Kirk settled himself at the back of the store and began leafing through the hardcover books. He wished he had room enough in his cabin to start a collection. When a person could touch a book instead of just viewing it . . .

Kirk's thoughts were interrupted when an arm was thrown around his shoulder and a cloth placed tightly over his mouth and nose. He struggled to pull away, but dizziness rapidly overtook him. Kirk realized at once that the cloth had some kind of drug on it. He felt himself losing consciousness.

"Pick him up before someone sees us," he heard a voice, as though from a great distance, echo in his head. "The storeroom is there."

Kirk passed out.



"Jim! Jim! C'mon, wake up!" Kirk heard McCoy order. He groggily opened his eyes to see both McCoy and Spock bending over him, concern evident on their faces. "W-what happened?" he moaned.

"You'll have to tell us, Jim. Spock came looking for you and found you unconscious in this storeroom."

"I was attacked," Jim said, struggling to sit up. "They put a cloth over my face. It had something on it . . . I guess I passed out."

"Yeah, I guess you did," McCoy said as he gently put his arms around Kirk's shoulders to help him sit up.

"You said 'they', Captain. How many were there?" Spock asked.

"I dunno, Spock. One man had me pinned, while another was talking. I didn't see them."

"It doesn't make any sense," McCoy said to Spock. "They didn't hurt him. Why would someone knock Jim out and drag him back here?"

"You're quite right, Doctor. It makes no sense whatsoever."

"Well, Jim. Shore leave has just been cancelled for you," McCoy announced. "We're beaming back to the ship and I'm going to give you a thorough going over."



F. Gravet

"More tests?"

"More tests."

"Bones, I'm okay," Kirk murmured, a pleading look in his eyes. "Like you said, they didn't hurt me. I think I've spent enough time in sickbay lately."

"Well, you're gonna spend some more," the doctor stated as he helped Kirk to his feet. He noted that the captain was pretty shaky.

Spock flipped open his communicator. "Three to beam up."



James Kirk sat on the edge of his bunk, trembling. He brushed his hair back and felt that it was wet with sweat. Damn! he thought. Another nightmare!

Kirk took several deep breaths, trying to quiet his shivering. It had been nearly a week since he had been attacked. McCoy had not found a single thing wrong with him and assured him that he was in perfect health. Yet, Kirk knew he was unwell. At times he felt as though his insides were on fire. He did not know how long he could handle it -- between the nightmares and the frequent bouts of pain, he was weakening and he knew it. How the hell was he supposed to be the captain if he spent all his time in sickbay? Anyhow, McCoy never found anything . . .

Kirk lay back in the bed and noticed the covers were slick with sweat. He could not remember the dream, but it must have been pretty bad. He had to get some sleep! He was due to report to the bridge at 0800, and it was now 0400! If he took one of McCoy's red pills, he would oversleep. If he didn't, there wasn't much chance of getting back to sleep.

In an attempt to get comfortable, Kirk lay on one side and then another, but was unsuccessful. He didn't feel very well. No matter what McCoy said, there was something wrong with him. Of course, he had not told Bones about the pain. It had started only a few days ago . . .

Kirk's reflections turned suddenly to the first assault. He remembered with clarity about the Klingon words, the feel of the hypo touching his arm. Why didn't anyone believe him? Could he really have imagined it?

Kirk gasped as his body was violently racked with stabbing pains. He curled himself into a fetal position and rocked himself, trying to stop the agony. The pain subsided as quickly as it started. He sat up shivering and knew that he was going to be sick. It took all his strength to make it to the head.



Kirk was reclining against the wall in sickbay as McCoy, looking half asleep, blazed into the room. "Chris said you had to see me. Do you realize what time . . ." the doctor halted as he saw Kirk's pallor. "Jim, what's the matter? You look like hell!" McCoy walked over to where Kirk was leaning and brushed back a lock of uncombed damp hair.

"I think maybe I'm sick," the captain admitted. He could not keep the tremor out of his voice.

"I think maybe you are," McCoy agreed, taking Kirk's arm and leading him to the first diagnostic bed. "Come on, Jim. Sit."

Kirk did not try to sit. Instead he lay down, throwing a hand across his face. McCoy was more worried than ever. This wasn't like his friend.

"Tell me," McCoy ordered softly, flipping the switch on the panel above the bed.

Kirk took his arm down and met the doctor's gaze. His large hazel eyes showed a worried expression.

"It really hurt, Bones," he whispered. "I've never hurt like that."

"Where, Jim? Where were you hurting?"

"I dunno. Everywhere, I guess. My body felt like it was on fire!"

McCoy's eyes flickered to the panel. "Your pain level is still above normal. Where is the pain now?"

Kirk shrugged his shoulders.

"I know," McCoy replied for him. "Everywhere. Care to be more specific?"

"I wish I could."

"Okay, Jim. When did the pain start?"

"About an hour ago."

"That's not what I meant. Is this the first time it's happened?"

Kirk turned his head away as he mumbled, "No."

"So when did you start having this pain?"

"About five days ago. Right after we left Benecia."

"Five days!" McCoy exploded. He reached out and turned Kirk's face toward him. "Why the hell haven't you told me?"

"It wasn't bad until tonight," Jim whispered hesitantly. "And besides, you keep saying I'm fine . . . in perfect health. I figured you'd think that it was just my imagination."

"Damn it, Jim! You know I wouldn't think any such thing!"

Kirk's eyes darkened as he said simply, "You think the Klingons and the hypo are my imagination."

"We're not talking about Klingons now. We're talking about you. I want to get to the bottom of this."

"You haven't yet." The words were bitter.

"And you damn well haven't helped me!" McCoy made an effort to calm himself as Kirk again turned his head away. The doctor gently rested a hand on his friend's shoulder and pleaded, "Talk to me, Jim."

The kindness in McCoy's voice made Kirk turn back to him. The doctor slowly rubbed his hand up and down Kirk's arm, offering comfort. "Hey, I'm not just a doctor! I'm a friend. Tell me about it."

Kirk began to relax again as McCoy slowly massaged his arm. "I got sick tonight."

"Sick?"

"Yeah. After the nightmare and the pain, I got sick."

"You mean you vomited?"

Kirk nodded.

"What nightmare?"

"I've told you, I can't remember the dreams. I woke up, really sweating. Then I tried to get back to sleep, but I had this pain . . . "

"Go on."

"It hurt all over! It felt like my body was on fire inside. I don't think it really lasted very long. It just seemed like it did. Then I got real sick."

"And it started five days ago?"

Kirk nodded again.

"But it wasn't bad until now?"

"No." Kirk forced himself to sit up in the bed. McCoy could see that Kirk's body was trembling. There was fear evident in the hazel eyes.

McCoy soothingly put his arms around his patient, holding him close. "What is it, Jim?"

"I'm going to lose her, Bones," he confessed. "The *Enterprise*. I'll lose her! I can't command like this. There's something wrong with me and you can't even tell me what it is!"

McCoy pulled back and stared into Kirk's eyes. They brimmed with unshed tears. His captain at this moment appeared so young and vulnerable.

The doctor pulled Kirk close again and began to gently rock him. "I'll find out what's hurting you, Jim," he promised. "You aren't going to lose your ship."



Kirk beamed down with the ambassadors to Starbase 12, Spock following him doggedly. Komack had requested a conference with the captain and First Officer. Urgent business. Kirk had hoped to avoid a meeting with Komack -- he wasn't his favorite admiral.

Now he was stuck with it and the ambassadors as well. Their bickering continued as they walked toward Komack's office. Finally Zarn turned his attention from M'Laya to Kirk. "I do not understand why you are to see Komack first!" he stated, puffing out his thin chest. "I think our matter is more urgent!"

"We are under orders to see him," Spock stated. "Hopefully, the meeting will be a brief one."

"While I sit and stare at this one!" M'Laya pointed to Zarn. "It was bad enough when we ran into each other on the ship! Captain Kirk, you should have taken the time to assure that no such incidences occurred. I . . ."

"Please be silent!" Spock commanded. "I believe that the captain has heard enough of your complaints!"

Kirk turned toward the Vulcan and frowned, his expression clearly stating, 'Don't baby me!'

"Captain Kirk, Mr. Spock," a young woman called as they rounded the corner. "Admiral Komack has been expecting you. Please go in."

She gestured to the ambassadors. "Please be seated."

Kirk fought to keep a smile from his face as he noticed that there was only one small couch for the ambassadors to sit on . . . together! Starbase renovation . . .

Zarn and M'Laya looked at one another in dismay.

X

"I felt that you should hear this personally, Kirk," Admiral Komack said as he leaned back in the chair. "We wanted to keep the whole thing quiet . . . but it's only a matter of time until word leaks out."

Kirk and Spock met each other's gaze in puzzlement. They turned their attention back to Komack.

"Commodore Wesley is a friend of yours, Kirk?"

"Yes. I've known Bob for years," Kirk replied.

"He's defected to the Klingon Empire."

"W-what?"

"We have a vid-tape of his defection speech," Komack continued. "It's been thoroughly analyzed. It's for real. We've had experts check out Wesley's eyes and voice for signs of a drug. None."

"It's not possible!" Kirk protested. "Not Bob Wesley! What could be his reason?"

Komack took a tape from his desk and popped it into the vid-player. Wesley's face came on the screen. The Commodore began making an impassioned speech in regard to a Federation plot to take over the Klingon Empire. He talked calmly about how he had found out about this plot some months ago, and was going to help the Klingons to thwart Federation plans. The Federation had become corrupted. He would aid in its demise.

Kirk sat back silently, stunned.

"Was there any indication of an unbalanced mental state prior to his defection?" Spock asked.

"No. Not really." Komack paused, then continued, "Apparently, he hadn't been feeling too well. The doctors ran tests, but couldn't find anything physically wrong with him."

"You said he did not feel well?" Spock sat forward in his seat. "Explain."

"Nothing the doctors could really put their fingers on. Wesley had been suffering from some pretty bad nightmares . . ."

Spock turned quickly toward his captain, who sat gripping the arms of the chair tightly -- his face white, his eyes frightened.

"Jim! Jim! Hold up!" McCoy called as he rushed to catch up with Kirk.

Kirk slowed down and waited for the doctor as he entered the turbolift. "Well. What is it?" Kirk asked as he ordered the turbolift to the bridge.

"You've been avoiding me, Jim. It's been a week since we've left Starbase 12. Where've you been hiding?"

Kirk looked away, evading the doctor's eyes. "I haven't been hiding. I've been busy."

"I'm sure you have. I've ordered you to sickbay twice and you haven't showed up yet."

Jim looked at McCoy, frowning. "I'm sorry. I had other things . . . "

"We're going to sickbay now." McCoy halted the turbolift.

"Why?" Jim asked in a harsh voice. "More tests?"

"Maybe."

"Well, you haven't found a damn thing!" Kirk exploded. "Bridge!"

"Halt!" McCoy ordered as the turbolift again stopped. Then the doctor stepped over to Kirk and laid a hand gently on his friend's shoulder. He asked softly, "How do you feel, Jim?"

"I feel fine, Bones. Better than I have in a long time!" The silence hung heavily between them for a moment until Kirk asked bitterly, "Waiting for me to defect to the Klingons?"

McCoy bit back an angry response and instead ordered the lift to sickbay.

"I'm telling you, I'm okay," Kirk protested. "I haven't had so many nightmares. I haven't had another attack of . . . whatever it was!"

"Spock's waiting for us in my office," McCoy said calmly.

"Spock?"

"We've found out some things, Jim."

"What things?"

The lift stopped and McCoy motioned the captain out. Kirk reluctantly stepped into the corridor. Suddenly he tensed his shoulders, his head held high. "Fine. Let's go," was all Kirk muttered as he strode purposefully toward McCoy's office. The doctor shook his head and lengthened his stride to catch up to Kirk.

The office door hissed open as Kirk briskly entered the room. He flung himself down in the chair opposite Spock. McCoy sat beside the captain.

"Shoot," Kirk ordered.

The Vulcan raised his eyebrow in momentary surprise. "What, Captain"

"McCoy said you'd found out some 'things', Spock."

"Dr. McCoy has found out additional information regarding Commodore Wesley," Spock explained. "We feel it is vital that you hear these facts."

Kirk's expression softened as he turned to the doctor. "Well, Bones?"

"I put in a call to Mack Brannon," the McCoy began. "He's Wesley's ship's physician. I know Mack real well. We go all the way back to med school." McCoy hesitated, then continued, "I know you're worried about what happened to Wesley . . . and if there's any connection to your . . . problems."

"Did you find a connection?" Kirk asked, puzzled.

"Wesley was attacked almost three months ago. He went down with a landing party and got separated from the group. He was later found unconscious. He didn't know what had happened to him." McCoy paused and tried to gauge how Kirk was taking this.

"Go on, Bones," Kirk ordered as he watched McCoy closely. McCoy was obviously ill at ease.

"This isn't easy to tell you, Jim. Wesley began suffering nightmares and seemed to be pretty sick. He got better until . . . he was apparently attacked again."

"Again?"

"There were three attacks. Wesley couldn't remember what happened. Each attack occurred over three weeks apart. After the last assault, he really got sick. After a few days, he was fine -- back to normal. Then he disappeared."

"Disappeared?"

"His crew went ashore on Wrigleys. Bob Wesley was with them. He wasn't seen again."

Kirk glanced into Spock's eyes evident with worry, then back to McCoy. "Let's hear all of it, Bones."

"They set up a planet-wide search. Stayed in orbit for a week. Komack finally ordered them to leave -- said he'd take care of it. He did. Wesley was declared 'officially dead'."

"Starfleet handles things efficiently," Kirk commented sarcastically.

"Jim, almost a month later, Wesley made his defection speech," McCoy stated. "The Klingons must have had him for five weeks."

"I'm waiting for your point," Kirk almost whispered.

"I think you know," McCoy replied. "Wesley had been attacked three times. A couple of weeks after the third assault, he disappeared. You've been attacked twice. There was an interim of three weeks between each assault, same as Bob Wesley's."

The captain jumped up and began tensely pacing the floor. "So, you believe that if the Klingons had initiated the assaults," Kirk said, his voice low, "and if they're after Starfleet captains, I'll be the next in line."

"That would appear to be a logical conclusion," Spock stated. "If that is the case."

"Wouldn't you say there's an awful lot of 'ifs'?"

"Jim, listen to me," McCoy pleaded. "How do you account for what's been happening to you?"

Kirk stopped his pacing, his expression thoughtful. He threw himself back down into the chair in defeat. "I can't."

"It would seem that we must expect another attack upon you," Spock pointed out. "It should occur within the next two to three weeks."

"Wonderful," Kirk murmured, his eyes downcast.

"I suggest we keep a 24-hour security guard on you," Spock stated.

"W-what?" Kirk stammered, puzzlement in his hazel eyes as he met the Vulcan's soft gaze.

"We have an advantage, Captain," Spock continued. "We know the timetable, if our hypothesis is correct. With protection, you can avoid the third attack."

"Wait a minute! I don't want a 24-hour guard on me!"

"Captain, under the circumstances . . ."

"Damn the circumstances!" Kirk exploded. "I can't run the ship like that! Hell, why don't you just lock me in a security cell! That's bound to keep me safe!"

"Jim, don't be so defensive," McCoy ordered. "We're trying to help you. God knows, I haven't been much help so far!"

Kirk's expression changed. He reached over and touched the doctor lightly on his shoulder. A pained look was in Kirk's eyes as he whispered, "It's not your fault, Bones." McCoy looked up and met his friend's gaze. He saw the look of understanding there.

"The fact remains. There may be another attack, if the pattern is the same," Spock interrupted.

"Have you reported your theory to Starfleet?" Kirk asked.

"I have attempted it, Jim." Spock replied. "They find the theory unacceptable."

"Great."

"That is not unexpected," the Vulcan pointed out. "Regardless of what Starfleet thinks, I believe another assault is imminent. We must take precautions."

"Round the clock protection?"

"Yes, Jim. We are unsure of what we are fighting."

Kirk only frowned.

"I realize that you do not like the thought of being constantly protected," the Vulcan continued, "but I believe it is necessary."

"It's either get a security guard or have Spock kill himself trying to protect you on a 24-hour basis!" McCoy grunted. "You're pretty important to us, Jim. Let us help you."

Kirk sat back, relaxing a little. His expression showed he was deep in thought. He made his decision quickly.

"Okay, Spock. Do whatever you think is necessary." Kirk jumped from his chair and bounded to the door. He was stopped as Spock called, "Wait!" Kirk turned slowly around to confront the Vulcan.

Spock sat tautly, obviously uncomfortable. "There is more."

"More?" Kirk asked, moving back to where Spock and McCoy had remained seated.

"I wish to establish a mind link with you. It would be directional."

"Directional?"

"Should our attempt at protection fail and the Klingons manage to seize you, I would be able to locate you through the link."

Kirk smiled. "That's a crazy idea, Spock."

"Not 'crazy', Jim. A directional link is easily initiated. It would be temporary and could be removed after the danger is past."



Kirk sighed. "I gave in to the 24-hour security guard. I think that's enough."

"Not for me," Spock said bluntly.

"And I want to do another medical check on you," McCoy stated. "Just to be safe."

Kirk drew back, his expression closed.

"How are you feelin', Jim?" McCoy questioned softly. "Hiding any more problems from me?"

"No," Kirk replied. "I've been feeling fine. I don't even have the nightmares so often."

"Mack told me that Wesley was feeling 'fine' before the last assault," McCoy said calmly, his eyes meeting Jim's. "No nightmares."

Kirk paled as he looked away.

"I believe a directional link is necessary," Spock repeated.

Kirk sat uncertainly back in the chair, his eyes holding the Vulcan's. He slowly nodded his assent. "What's happening to me, Spock?" he asked desperately.

"I do not know, Jim," Spock's voice held a note of sympathy. "I only know that I will not lose you."

Spock wrenched forward and touched Kirk's face, positioning his fingers for the mind meld. Kirk held the Vulcan's gaze, his eyes never wavering.



Kirk walked briskly into his cabin, throwing off his tunic as he headed for the shower. He smiled as the sonics cleansed him. He felt pretty damn good, in spite of the fact that two security guards dogged his every move. Trust Spock not to be content with just one! He had to admit, though, having two guards outside his door did give him a sense of well-being.

In fact, during the last two weeks he felt things were pretty well back to normal. He knew Spock and McCoy did not share his enthusiasm. They were both mothering him.

The captain stepped out of the shower and headed for his bunk. He felt tired right down to his bones. No little red pills tonight! This boring star-mapping expedition they had been undergoing had taken more out of him than a fight with a Rigellian Warrior!

He curled up in the bunk and immediately drifted off into a deep sleep. He did not hear the whine of a phaser as the two security guards outside his door vanished.

Kirk awoke abruptly as he felt a pressure on his arm and heard a slight hissing sound. He looked up into a pair of brown/black eyes. "Andrews!" he exclaimed as he recognized the ensign. "What are you doing here?"

"You are a light sleeper, Captain," the tall man said as he pushed Kirk back down onto the pillow and held him.

"What the . . . let go of me!" Kirk fought, but Andrews held him even more tightly.

"Don't make me hurt you. Be still," the man commanded.

Kirk again tried to throw the man off, but the trembling in his own body stopped him. He lay back weakly.

"That's better," Andrews stated. "You are making this difficult. You should not have awakened and recognized me."

Kirk moaned and pulled his legs up as he was seized with a bout of uncontrollable pain. He could feel the sweat begin to pour off his body. Kirk began to writhe in the bed, moaning softly.

"It is necessary, Captain," the man said not unkindly. "The pain will pass."

"Tell me why," Kirk pleaded, but again gasped as the fire in his body increased. He could feel tears running down his cheeks from the unrestrained agony.

"There is a reason," Andrews said quietly. "But I cannot tell you. I do regret hurting you."

Kirk tossed his head from side to side as he drew his legs up even tighter against his body.

"You should not have awakened. Since you recognized me, I must destroy myself."

"Damn you!" was all Kirk could say before he was engulfed by another bout of pain. His delirious moan effectively covered the sound of the door as it hissed open.

Spock walked swiftly toward the ensign and applied the Vulcan nerve pinch. Andrews dropped to the ground, the hypo in his hand. The Vulcan then rushed in alarm to Kirk's side. He raised up the human and held him gently. Kirk fought to push away. He was incoherent with the pain.

"Be still, Jim," Spock ordered softly.

Kirk looked up at him, confusion showing in his eyes. "Andrews," he whispered.

"I know, Jim. He is unconscious." Spock paused, then continued, "I felt your pain in our link. I rushed down here to find the security guards missing. I presume they are dead."

Kirk looked up at the Vulcan, his eyes wide with alarm. As he felt another seizure grab him, he held onto Spock with all his strength.

"H-hurts," Jim murmured.

Spock lowered Kirk gently back onto the pillow and then walked over to the intercom.

"McCoy here," said a tired voice.

"Medical emergency, Doctor," Spock stated in his resonant voice. "Captain's cabin."

"Jim?"

"Yes."

"On my way." The intercom clicked off.

Spock glanced at Andrews, who was still sprawled unconscious. He picked up the hypo from the man's hand and returned to Kirk's side.

"Jim," Spock said very softly. "McCoy is on the way." The Vulcan wrapped his arms around Kirk's shoulders and held him. Kirk groaned as more pain engulfed his body.

"Jim. Jim," Spock murmured softly, brushing his hand across the human's fevered face. The Vulcan had never felt so helpless. He was relieved to hear the door open and McCoy burst into the room.

The doctor shot a quick look at Andrews, then moved quickly to Kirk's side. "What happened?" McCoy asked, pulling out his scanner.

Spock revealed the object in his hand. "A hypo, Doctor," he stated.

McCoy looked at the hypo in dismay, then recovered himself and commented, "We'll have it analyzed."

As McCoy carefully ran the med scanner over him, Kirk began to thrash wildly. "Hold him tighter, Spock!" the doctor ordered. "Damn! His level of pain is off the scale!"



Kirk let out a strangled cry as he collapsed weakly in Spock's arms.

"Is he unconscious, Doctor?"

"No, damn it! He isn't," McCoy said gruffly, then reached to push back the damp hair from Kirk's forehead. He again checked the scanner.

"The pain is lessening, Spock," he observed.

"He is out of pain?"

"Hell, no! Does he look like he's out of pain?" McCoy flared, then added, "Call sickbay and get a stretcher up here fast. And Spock . . . better clear the corridors."

As the Vulcan moved to the intercom, McCoy carefully wiped the sweat from Kirk's face. "It's okay, Jim," he whispered. "We have the hypo and we can find out what drug they gave you."

Kirk struggled to look at the doctor. "Oh, God! Bones! It hurts!" Kirk let out a quiet moan.

"I know, Jim. Trust me. I'm gonna help you."

"Doctor, the corridors are being cleared," Spock said efficiently. "And a medical team and stretcher should be here momentarily. I will join you in sickbay shortly."

"What, Spock? You mean you're gonna let Jim out of your sight?"

"I must see to our prisoner, Doctor. After your departure, I shall have Security take him to a holding cell."

Spock inspected Kirk, a look of apprehension in his eyes. "Jim would not wish to be seen like this," he said softly. The door hissed open as the medical team arrived.



McCoy stood silently watching the panel as Kirk lay still and unmoving on the bed. Spock walked into sickbay and stood beside the doctor.

"He's unconscious, Spock," McCoy stated without glancing around to see who'd come in. He knew it had to be the Vulcan.

"His condition?"

"The pain stopped several minutes ago, thank God! I think maybe the worst is over."

"Have you ascertained what was injected into his body?"

The doctor turned to face the Vulcan, a look of defeat in McCoy's eyes. "Not a trace of anything shows, Spock. We don't have a clue."

"The hypo?"

"It's being analyzed."

Both men looked at Kirk. It seemed as though he was peacefully asleep, the dark lashes resting on his pale cheeks. Spock reached out and lightly touched his hand. He could feel how cold it was, much different from the fevered body he had held only minutes before.

"Damn it, Spock!" McCoy cried, frustration showing on his face. "Why the hell can't we find out what's going on?"

"Doctor, we are trying."

"Trying? Oh sure -- we're trying! But we haven't helped Jim one damn bit!"

A pained look came over the Vulcan's face. McCoy noticed it at once. He turned and held Spock's gaze. "Didn't mean to snap," he said apologetically. "It's not your fault -- it's mine. I'm a doctor. I've got every kind of modern scientific medical equipment available. And no matter what I try, I can't find out what's wrong with Jim!"

"Do not blame yourself, Leonard," Spock said quietly. "We are dealing with an unknown. I do not doubt that if the answer is to be found, you are the man who can do it."

McCoy found himself blushing at the Vulcan's words. He rocked back on his heels in embarrassment.

"I wish to have the prisoner examined immediately," Spock stated abruptly. "He is still unconscious, making the present the ideal time to do so. I believe Andrews must be uncommonly strong. He managed to hold Jim down . . ."

"Well, I'm not leavin' Jim at this moment," McCoy said stubbornly. "It'll have to wait. I can take some security guards in with me later."

"That is unnecessary, Doctor. Nurse Chapel is quite capable of conducting the examination."

"Of whom?" she asked as she walked into the room, carrying the hypo on a tray.

"Have you found out what was in it?" McCoy asked, a hopeful expression on his face.

"No. I'm sorry." Christine watched the doctor's expression change to one of defeat. "The hypo was completely empty. We've found a few minute traces of different elements, but none that will tell us what drug was in it."

"Then, damn it, woman! Do some more tests!"

"Before you do," Spock interrupted, "I would like you to examine the prisoner."

"Of course, Mr. Spock."

"I shall accompany you."

A faint red tinge came across Christine's face. Spock again looked at Kirk. He stood staring for several seconds before ordering, "Doctor, you will advise me immediately if there is any change in the captain's condition."

"That goes without sayin', Spock."

McCoy's eyes followed Spock and Christine as they left the room. He turned back to Kirk.

"Damn it, Jim! Why would anyone do this to you?" he whispered, picking up Kirk's hand and rubbing it softly.

There was no response from his patient.



"Mr. Spock!" Christine exclaimed in surprise. "This man is a Klingon!" she stood up from Andrews' prone body, waving the med-scanner as though it had told a tremendous lie.

"It is as I expected," the Vulcan replied calmly.

"A Klingon serving on this ship!"

"Nurse Chapel, I wish you to return to the medical records section. I want to know why Andrews' initial physical upon his arrival on board did not reveal this fact."

"No need, Mr. Spock," Christine frowned. "He came on board only two months ago fresh from Starfleet Academy -- or so his papers said. They also said he'd been given a thorough examination prior to his assignment to the **Enterprise**."

Andrews began moaning, trying to fight his way back to consciousness.

"Shall we get a security guard in here?" Christine asked in concern.

"Unnecessary. The guards are right outside the force field door. What does concern me," Spock continued levelly, "is why Andrews was not examined again upon his arrival on this vessel."

"Standard practice, Mr. Spock. All his medical papers were in order. We didn't have to examine him for another six months."

Spock turned toward Chapel, his hands clasped behind his back.

"How many others are on board without benefit of an examination, Nurse Chapel?"

Christine looked stunned as she suddenly realized the danger they were in. "You think there may be more Klingons on board?"

"I do not doubt it."

"Mr. Spock, I can have the computer pull all pertinent records."

"I suggest you do so immediately." Christine turned and ran out of the room without a backward glance.

There was another moan and Spock's attention became riveted on Andrews, who struggled to sit up. Spock stood watching, not helping the man.

After a couple of minutes, the prisoner managed to get to his feet. He stood face to face with the Vulcan, his eyes glowering. The man reached back and rubbed his neck. "A Vulcan nerve pinch, no doubt!" he growled.

"Who are you?"

"I'm Eric Andrews. You have a short memory."

"I have a very long memory. I know your fictitious name. What is your Klingon one?"

The prisoner at first looked startled, then smiled menacingly. "I won't tell you anything, Vulcan." The man paused, then asked, "Is Captain Kirk alive?"

"What kind of drug did you give him?"

"I asked if Kirk is alive!" Andrews insisted.

"Were you trying to kill him?"

The prisoner looked surprised, then confessed, "No. I didn't think it would hurt him so badly."

"You have been on this ship for two months. Why did you attack him now?" Spock continued his probing.

"Is Kirk alive?" the man asked again.

Spock glared at the prisoner, then replied, "The captain is alive."



The other man smiled. "Good. I have completed my mission."

"What mission?"

The prisoner only glared at the Vulcan as he stated, "You must realize, I will tell you nothing."

Spock took a deep breath as he regarded Andrews. He must find out why Kirk is under attack, what the Klingons have planned. There would be only one way to get this information . . . a way that went against all Vulcan principles and teachings. He would force a mind meld. He must save his friend.

Spock grabbed Andrews roughly by the shoulder as his other hand sought the meld position on the alien's face. The prisoner was startled as he realized what was happening. Then a calm look came over Andrews' face as he threatened, "You will not survive, Vulcan!"

Spock did not bother to reply. He held his fingers against the alien's face, and felt himself enter the man's mind. There was a blackness and then disorientation. They both fell to the floor, still locked together.

Andrews was dead.



Spock sat up abruptly and found himself staring directly into Kirk's green/gold eyes.

"Whoa, Spock!" the captain laughed, putting his hands on the Vulcan's shoulders. "You had a pretty close call!"

Spock, with a great deal of effort, managed to tear his gaze away from his laughing -- and very much alive -- friend and observe his surroundings. He was in sickbay.

"What happened?" Spock asked, while drinking in the sight of his friend. "How long have I been here?"

"Three days, Spock."

The Vulcan raised both eyebrows.

"For two of those days, we weren't sure you'd make it. You had me . . . us pretty worried."

McCoy walked into the room and smiled at the confused Vulcan. "Told you he can't be killed off that easily," McCoy grinned as he pulled out his scanner and ran it over the Vulcan's body. "Looks like you're gonna live."

"I could have told you that, Doctor."

"Don't look so smug, Spock," McCoy frowned. "That was a damn fool stunt you pulled!"

"Melding with that Klingon," Kirk explained. "You should never have tried it." Kirk added for Spock only, "Crazy Vulcan!"

"It seemed a logical thing to do at the time."

"Yeah, Spock. But what you didn't realize is that the Klingon was programmed for 'self destruct'," McCoy said. "He had an implant inside his wrist. Push with enough pressure - presto! No more Klingon!"

"He destroyed himself?"

"And tried to destroy you, too," Kirk frowned. "When they brought you in, I thought you were . . . dead." The Vulcan watched the captain flinch at the memory.

"As you can see, I am all right, Jim." Spock's lips turned upward into a slight smile. "Has Nurse Chapel obtained the information I requested?"

Kirk and McCoy looked at one another uncomfortably, then turned back to Spock. "She found what you wanted to know," McCoy said hesitantly. "There was another man who came in without a physical -- Ensign Jeffries. I sent Security to bring him here . . ."

"And?"

"Too late, Spock," Kirk answered bitterly. "They found him dead in his cabin. He had the same implant."

Spock sighed deeply.

"You okay?" Kirk asked in concern.

"Perfectly okay, Captain. I feel . . .frustrated."

Kirk smiled. "Well, you have lots of company!"

"At least, two of Jim's enemies are dead," McCoy stated, assurance in his voice. "Maybe this will end it."

"I think not, Doctor. The Klingons have come this far. I doubt if they will give up."

"Give up what, Spock?"

"Give up the Captain."

The silence weighed heavily for a moment. Finally, Kirk shrugged and said, "Guess I'll head back to the bridge."

"Wait a minute!" McCoy cried. "I haven't released you from sickbay yet!"

"You said I'm fine, Bones!"

"Yeah. Well, a couple more days of rest won't hurt you."

Kirk fixed his stare on the doctor, his eyes darkening. "I don't need more rest. I want to return to the bridge."

McCoy shrugged, deciding to submit to defeat gracefully. "Actually, Jim," he admitted, "I managed to keep you here longer than I expected -- thanks to Spock!"

Spock shot the doctor a questioning look.

"Jim wouldn't leave your side," McCoy explained, his eyes twinkling, "so it was pretty easy to keep him where I wanted him -- in sickbay!"

A flush came over Kirk's face as he stated, "I'm officially going back on duty as of now." He turned and strode toward the door.

"Wait, Captain!" Spock called, bouncing from the bed and landing lightly on his feet. "I will join you."

"Wait a minute!" McCoy protested.

Kirk turned, took one look at the doctor's exasperated expression, and laughed. "C'mon, Spock," he said. "Let's go mind the store!"



James Kirk was very relaxed as he studied the chessboard. He had been feeling better each day. The nightmares had stopped and he'd had no more attacks of pain. He was beginning to think he would be all right.

Spock did not share the captain's optimism. It had been nearly three weeks since Andrews' attack on Kirk. If the timetable was correct, in five more days -- perhaps less -- there would be another attempt.

"Spock, you've been moping," Kirk stated as he pushed his rook forward.

"Vulcans do not mope. I have been evaluating the situation concerning the assaults upon you."

"We have two dead Klingons on this ship. The end."

"Perhaps."

"Okay, Spock. Let's have it."

"Andrews was on this ship for two months, Jeffries for three weeks. Jeffries was in a position to know all our incoming orders, as he was Lt. Uhura's relief."

Andrews was stationed in Environmental Control and could not have known of this ship's orders or future destinations."

"Go on."

"The Klingons expected us during your first two assaults. Jeffries was not on board to give them the information and Andrews had no access to such knowledge. The only explanation is that there is another person -- or persons -- on board feeding information to the Klingons."

"But you said there were only two Klingon spies aboard the *Enterprise*."

"That is true," Spock stated pensively, shaping his fingers into a pyramid beneath his chin. "But the other spies may not be Klingons."

"Explain."

"If Commodore Wesley's mind has been so conditioned to turn against the Federation and defect to the Klingon Empire, other minds may also have been subjected to such treatment."

"You're suggesting that the Klingons have already brain washed some of our people . . . maybe months ago." Kirk looked thoughtful. "I don't know why I didn't think of it. It makes sense." He sat quietly, then met the Vulcan's eyes. Kirk was confused. "Why didn't you suggest this to me earlier, Spock?"

"Captain . . . "

"You think there's spies running around my ship, and you don't tell me!" Kirk exclaimed, a hurt look on his face.

"If my theory is accurate, there is nothing we can do. A medical test will not reveal the type of mind-altering that we are discussing. It would not even show signs of the drug that was used. Since we are helpless in this situation, I saw no need to worry you further."

"No need!" Kirk exploded. "Damn it, Spock! You've been babying me! Now either I'm capable of running this ship or I'm not! And since I am running it, you should be supplying me with complete information at all times! Have you forgotten your duty?"

"I have not," Spock said softly. "I have a duty to you, as well as to the ship."

Kirk made an effort to calm himself, then regarded the Vulcan. "Which comes first?" he asked quietly.

Spock looked into his captain's eyes and swallowed hard. He made no reply. After a moment, Kirk realized that the Vulcan was not going to answer. He decided not to force the issue. "What now, Spock? What do we do?"

"I would suggest security confinement for you during the next week," Spock said quietly, already knowing what the reply would be.

"You want to lock me up for a week!" he blazed. "Hell, no! I won't go for that!"

"I did not think you would. I must point out, however, that it is the most logical course of action."

"I can't do it, Spock. I'm not the kind of man who can run and hide from things."

The Vulcan did not protest. He knew it was true. "Captain, if I might make another suggestion?"

Kirk shrugged.

"Tomorrow you are scheduled for the landing party on Regus II. I believe it would be wiser if you were to remain on the bridge."

Kirk looked down, avoiding the Vulcan's eyes. He whispered, "No. It won't work. If there are spies aboard this ship, I'm no safer here. I'm not going into 'hiding'. I'm beaming down."

"Then I shall accompany you." Spock's words were almost an order.

Kirk looked at the Vulcan and smiled, "I thought you would." He sat back tiredly, rubbing his eyes.

"Captain, if you wish to rest, we can continue the chess game later."

"Yeah, Spock. I'm pretty tired," he yawned.

Spock gracefully stood up and stared down at the human. "Good night, Jim. Sleep well." Before the Vulcan reached the door, Kirk called to him. Spock turned around in response.

The captain rose from his chair and walked over to the Vulcan, gently placing his hand on Spock's arm. "I want you to know," Kirk said quietly, "that if something happens to me . . . it's my fault. You've done everything in your power to protect me. I don't want you to blame yourself."

Spock placed his hand on top of Kirk's. The moment seemed endless as brown eyes locked onto hazel ones. Finally, the Vulcan pulled back and stated boldly, "I will not lose you, Jim." He turned quickly and left the room.

Kirk stood and stared at the closed door. He admitted to himself that he was scared.



"This would be an ideal planet for shore leave!" Kirk laughed, bending down to look at an enormous flower. "Except for the orange sky, it's almost like Earth!"

"We are here to observe the inhabitants," Spock reproached him gently, "not the flora and fauna."

"Shouldn't you be categorizing the 'flora and fauna'?" Kirk asked, smiling. "It seems like all you've been studying is me!"

Spock's skin turned a dark green. "If you will recall, when Doctor McCoy and Sulu left a few minutes ago, I promised I would keep an eye on you."

"Well, you've managed to keep both of them on me! Hey . . . look, Spock! A rabbit!"

"It is not a rabbit, though it does resemble one," Spock commented.

Lt. Vance and Hogue approached the captain. "Sir, we spotted an encampment just over the rise," Hogue stated. "I think we should investigate. We haven't found any sign of the inhabitants yet -- maybe that's where they're hiding."

"Okay. You and Vance fan out. Put your phasers on stun," Kirk ordered. "Spock and I will take the middle." The four men moved carefully toward the encampment, all senses alert. There was no sign of recent habitation, only a few dead campfires.

Hogue reached the campsite first and called out, "All clear!"

Suddenly there was a whine of a phaser. Hogue and Vance disappeared.

Kirk immediately recognized the sound. It was a Klingon disruptor! "Get down!" he called to Spock too late. The Vulcan was already falling. He had been grazed by the disruptor's blast.

Kirk fired his phaser randomly toward where the disruptor fire had originated. He crawled toward Spock, still firing. The disruptor fire stopped.

It seemed that it took hours for Kirk to reach the Vulcan. He touched Spock. The Vulcan's skin felt cold, the pulse rapid. Fear gripped Kirk as he flipped open his communicator. There was nothing on it but static. It was evident that the Klingons were interfering with communications.

Kirk raised his head as high as he dared. They were in a glade, nothing but tall grass around them -- no where to hide. He bent back down and laid his hand on the Vulcan's face.

"Spock!" Kirk whispered. "Spock, wake up. Come out of it!" The Vulcan did not move. The pulse was still far too rapid. Kirk had to get him back to the ship! Again he flipped open his communicator.

"I'm afraid that it won't work, Captain," a familiar voice said.

Kirk turned quickly, aiming his phaser. Seven Klingons were approaching him without fear. Kor led them, smiling.

"Another step and you're dead!" Kirk warned.

Kor stopped, hands on his hips, as he stated flatly, "Fire your weapon and the Vulcan dies."

Kirk regarded the other Klingons. Each had disruptors in hand -- all pointing toward Spock.

"Don't!" Kirk ordered.

Kor only smiled widely as he continued his approach. He stopped before the captain.

"Get up!" Commander Kor ordered. "Surrender your weapon."

Kirk stood slowly, but kept his phaser pointed at the alien.

"Shoot me, Kirk, and the Vulcan dies," Kor said again as he held out his hand for the phaser.

"On one condition," Kirk said evenly, his expression closed. "You leave Spock alone. I don't want him harmed. Give me your word."

"And if I don't give it?"

"I'll kill you right now. Spock's life and mine would be forfeit."

Kor grinned. "Give me your weapon and I will spare the Vulcan's life. You have my word."

Kirk stood rigidly, squaring his jaw in defiance, as he handed the phaser to Kor. "So we meet again, Kirk," Kor mused. "Only this time the Klingons are in control."

"Where are my other men?"

"They were so engrossed in their explorations that they've moved quite some distance from here. They are out of range to hear our disruptor fire. Most fortunate for them. I was certain it would be necessary to kill them, also."

"You kill easily."

"Yes," Kor smiled. "We do."

"What now?"

"You will come with us back to our shuttle, which will rendezvous with my ship in three hours. You'll be taken to Krymet, where the Emperor awaits your arrival."

"You don't think you can get off this planet without the **Enterprise** spotting you?" Kirk flared.

"Temper, Captain! It will be as easy for us to leave as it was for us to arrive. We have a cloaking device."

"You can't use a cloaking device on anything as small as a shuttle!"

"You can't, but the Klingon Empire can. Further, we have special machinery set to jam all your communications. There must be a great deal of confusion on your ship."

Kirk stood straighter, staring directly into Kor's eyes. He was trapped, but he would not admit fear to the Klingon.

"Shall we go?" Kor inclined his head.

"First, I have a few questions."

"We will be spending a great deal of time together, Captain. I can answer your questions then."

Kirk smiled, though his eyes remained dark. He said lightly, "What's the matter, Kor? In a hurry? Do you think the *Enterprise* has already broken through your jamming?"

Kor shook his head. "That is not possible. But I am in somewhat of a hurry. We must inject you with the Ryxigen within the next three to five days."

"Why three to five days?"

"This will be explained to you."

"Why me?"

"That also will be explained. Actually, Kirk," Kor smiled, "You were my first choice. I have the honor of being in charge of you."

"How many of your spies are aboard my ship?" Kirk demanded.

"The knowledge will be of little use to you. You will not see the *Enterprise* again." Kor paused as he watched a pained look come over the human's face. Kirk hesitated a moment, then stood rigidly. He held his head high as he regarded his captor.

You put on a good show, Kor thought. Kor had met the human before and found that he held the captain in high esteem. This one was not like the other Federatii. Kirk had courage. And in another month or so, Kirk would have nothing. He almost felt pity for the human.

"I will answer your question and then we shall leave," Kor stated flatly. "You already know of the two Klingons on board your ship. They destroyed themselves as ordered. You do not know about Kevin O'Doud. He is human."

"And one of the top men in engineering!" Kirk exclaimed, his eyes bright with astonishment. "He's been on the ship almost as long as I have!"

"Yes, Captain. Prior to his coming aboard, he was assigned to medical leave on Starbase 10 while recovering from a fall he took on Beta 7. His body was greatly damaged."



"And when he reported to the Starbase, you were there."

Kor smiled slightly. "No. He never reached the Starbase. He was one of the first experiments with Ryxigen. In spite of the side effects while adapting to human body, it works amazingly well. Thanks to O'Doud, we were able to schedule our rendezvous here."

Kor reached out and grabbed Kirk's arm. "Now we go."

Kirk immediately pulled back, pushing the Klingon away. He instantly felt a hard slap from another of the aliens. Kirk lost his footing and fell to the ground, the side of his face on fire.

"Watch it, Kantra!" Kor warned. "This one must not be injured!" "Jaa," he continued. "Check the Vulcan. See if he lives."

"Kor!" Kirk protested, jumping to his feet. "You gave me your word!"

"Be still, Kirk!" Kor ordered.

Spock had been laying quietly, not daring to move. He knew he was badly injured and could possibly die. But he could not let that happen! He was the only one who knew where the Klingons were taking the captain -- the only one who could help him!

Spock heard Kor's orders and began to slow down his breathing. Unless the Klingons believed him to be dead, there would be no way to save Jim. He concentrated on making his pulse fainter.

Spock felt the touch of an alien hand as he was turned over on his back. The man roughly began an investigation of Spock's body. Finally satisfied, he rose and turned to Kor.

"The Vulcan is dead, my lord!"

"No!" Kirk's strangled cry echoed across the glade. "No!"

Kor noted the anguished look on the human's face and the wildness of his eyes. "Take him!" Kor ordered two of his guards. "Bring him to the shuttle."

Both guards fell to the ground as Kirk fought like a man possessed. Two more Klingons grabbed for the human, but Kirk turned swiftly and kicked, catching one man in the crotch. The alien fell, gasping with pain.

Kor threw up his hands. "I said take him! Are you all weaklings?"

Kirk was surrounded by angry Klingons, fists swinging from every direction. Several blows connected with his ribs and he realized they had been broken again. But he was not going to give up. Better to die fighting . . .

A fist connected hard with his jaw, sending Kirk sprawling in the tall grass. He struggled to get up, but could not. He was dizzy, then blackness overtook him.

Kor walked over and sat down next to his prisoner. He lightly took Kirk's face in his hands as he regarded the human. "Such fire!" he mused. "You do not easily admit defeat. But you will be defeated. For that, in a way, I am sorry." Kor stood and ordered, "Take him to the craft and be gentle with him. He is injured."

The Klingons did not spare a glance at the Vulcan who was lying several meters from them. Spock watched as they carried the captain away. With immense effort, the Vulcan reached for his communicator and flipped it open. There was only static.

Once again, Kirk's cry of "No!" rang through Spock's mind. The captain thought he was dead! He had never heard his friend's voice filled with such agony. Please, Jim, he begged mentally. Use the link! I am alive! The Vulcan painfully began trying to pull himself to his feet. He must find the jamming device, alert the Enterprise . . .

He fell, unconscious, down into the tall grass.



Spock slowly opened his eyes and looked at McCoy. The sky of Regus II made an orange halo around the doctor.

"Take it easy, Spock," McCoy ordered. "You seem to be suffering from a phaser blast."

Spock fought to sit up and Sulu was quickly there, helping him. "A disruptor blast, Doctor. It was meant to kill, but only grazed me."

"A disruptor?" Sulu questioned. "A Klingon disruptor?"

"They have the Captain."

McCoy paled. Sulu jumped up, phaser drawn, as though to confront the enemy.

"They are gone," Spock stated. "There is a device on this planet capable of jamming all our communications."

"So that's what happened to our communicators!"

"Where are the security guards?" McCoy asked.

"Dead."

"Where did they take Jim? Is he still on the planet?"

"No . . . a ship . . . " Spock fell back, exhausted from the effort of speaking.

"Just be still, Spock," McCoy ordered. "From what my scanner shows, that disruptor tore apart a lot of your insides. The Enterprise isn't even due to contact us

for another three hours. I think you'd better go into your healing trance. God knows, I can't help you."

"I must find Jim," Spock whispered.

"None of us is in any position to find anyone," the doctor pointed out. "If you don't go into the healing trance, you might not be alive three hours from now. Then how could you help Jim?"

Spock sighed and lay back in the grass, trying to relax. "Quite logical, Doctor. I shall attempt the trance." Spock paused, holding McCoy's gaze. "If I do not survive, the Klingons have taken the captain to Krymet, to give him another injection. You will also find that Lt. O'Doud in engineering is a spy." The speech exhausted Spock and the Vulcan's eyes drifted closed.

"That's right, Spock," McCoy said, hovering over his patient. "You go into your trance and heal your body. We both know you'll live because . . . Jim needs you."

Spock opened his eyes one more time to meet the doctor's worried stare. The anguish clearly showed in the Vulcan's warm brown eyes. He remembered his earlier words to his captain, 'I will not lose you, Jim.' And he must not!

"It's okay, Mr. Spock," Sulu said from somewhere nearby. Spock did not have the strength to turn his head to face the helmsman. "I'll find whatever device is jamming communications. I'll get hold of the *Enterprise*."

"Yeah, Spock," McCoy whispered. "Lay back now. Close your eyes. Don't worry, I'll be right here . . ."

Spock found himself relaxing at McCoy's soft words. He drifted into a healing sleep.



Kor sat facing his prisoner in the small security cell in the Klingon ship. Kirk looked tired, withdrawn. The human avoided Kor's eyes, and refused to respond to any of his questions.

"We will be at Krymet in six hours," Kor stated. "I will answer your questions now."

Kirk turned his head slowly to stare into the Klingon's eyes. The human held Kor's gaze, but never uttered a word. Kor began to feel uncomfortable. He cleared his throat. "I am sorry about the Vulcan, Kirk," Kor began. "I would not have had him killed. I regret his death. I would have liked to have tried the drug on him." The Klingon saw the bitter look in Kirk's eyes as the human turned away. Kor became angry. Kirk would talk!

"I suggest you cooperate with me, Captain. Soon you will have no choice, but now . . . Ah, but now!" the Klingon said sweetly. "You may remain stubborn and



refuse to speak. Perhaps that is best. I shall not hear your groans as my men take you!"

Kor had expected the human to explode at his statement; however, Kirk still sat quietly. "I mean it, Kirk!" Kor exclaimed, then got up from his chair and softly touched the human's cheek. "You are very beautiful and my men find you desirable. I think I will allow them to have you. It will be interesting to watch."

Kirk turned his head to meet Kor's gaze. He tried to move as little as possible. The bandaged ribs still hurt. The human's eyes were wide with astonishment as he whispered, "You'd do that to me?"

Kor stepped back. There was no fear in Kirk's face, only surprise. His opinion of the human increased. "No. I would not do that to you," Kor stated firmly.

"Then, why . . . ?"

"For two days you have sat here and refused to talk, refused nourishment. What am I to do with you?"

Kirk had a look of chagrin on his face as he asked softly, "Shouldn't that be my question?"

Kor grinned at the human. Then the Klingon sat back down in his chair, looking relaxed. "Humor, Captain? A most difficult concept."

"Yes. Spock thought so, too . . . " Kirk's voice trailed off.

"I understand now!" Kor exclaimed suddenly. "You are bereaved for the Vulcan! That is why you have been so . . . uncommunicative!"

Kirk shrugged tiredly as he rested his back against the wall. He was uncomfortable on the small cot provided. He would have liked to have laid down, but it would be painful. And he did not want to show his pain in front of Kor. "I don't have anything to say," Kirk said simply.

"You were full of questions on Regus II," Kor pointed out. "And full of fire. Are you defeated so easily?"

Kirk's eyes flashed at the Klingon.

"Good! So you have not given up yet! I had thought not." Kor found himself astonished at his own relief. "I will answer all questions. I will tell you about the drug."

Kirk made no response, but continued to hold the Klingon's gaze. "It is called Ryxigen and it is much more effective than our mind sifter."

Kirk found his curiosity aroused. "But you said your mind sifter could record every thought in the brain."

"I'm afraid I spoke somewhat grandiosely," Kor laughed. "It could record many thoughts, but not all. After a great deal of experimentation, we found we had

recorded a plethora of random, useless thoughts . . . and no military information at all. And the one on whom we used the mind sifter was mentally destroyed. The sifter was not successful. Ryxigen is."

"Why?" Kirk asked, wanting to keep silent, but his curiosity outweighed everything else.

"The drug is injected five times into the host's body. The first four injections are for acclimatization only. The drug, I must admit, has most peculiar and painful side effects. After the fifth shot, your body will be totally accepting of the Ryxigen. There will be no more pain."

The captain no longer felt like sitting. He laid back in the bunk, throwing his arm over his face to conceal his grimace of pain.

"Good, Captain!" Kor beamed. "You need much rest. Within two days, you will be given the fourth shot. You will need your strength."

"So when do I become a walking zombie?" Kirk whispered.

Kor frowned. "I do not understand your reference."

Kirk pulled his arm away from his face and turned slightly to face the Klingon. "When does it all end? When do I start spouting Klingon propaganda and rhetoric?"

"Oh, I see," Kor replied, pursing his lips. "When you receive the fifth injection, which will be about four weeks, your brain will be changed."

"What?"

"Yes. Your mind will be altered, accepting. After you receive the final injection, there will be trained people with you at all times to convert you to our ways, our ideas. They will stay with you for three days -- the time in which your mind will be totally pliable. After that, you will be one of us."

Kirk sat up in the bunk, ignoring the pain and dizziness that assaulted him. He realized it had been a very long time since he had eaten. "Why not now?" he asked, eyes dark with anger. "Why the hell prolong it? You could just wipe my mind now. Then let me call Starfleet and tell them I've defected!"

"Calm down, Captain," Kor ordered, but his words were soft. He did not like what was going to be done to this particular man. "We cannot do it now. I told you, the body must be acclimated. Ryxigen is a very strong drug. To give you the final shot now would kill you immediately. After the fifth shot, the effect on the brain is irreversible."

Kirk looked up, his eyes hopeful, and asked, "You mean that right now, I'm . . . I'm . . ."

"Undamaged, Kirk. If we fail to give you the shot within the next two days, the acclimating drug would simply wear off. We would have to start again." Kor sighed, then added, "I am sorry, Kirk, but this is necessary. I'm sorry for the pain and suffering it has caused you, but it will be over soon. I have no wish to harm you."

"So why did your thugs nearly kill me on Rigel?"

"They were a bit overzealous and not very fond of humans. They have been executed for their error."

Kirk leaned back heavily against the wall.

"What about Bob Wesley? He's the result of 'step 5'?"

"Of course, Captain. And he's quite happy. You'll see him on Krymet."

"Get out of here, Kor. Leave me alone."

"You are in no position to give orders," Kor laughed out loud. "But I am glad to see some of the fire returning!" Jim threw Kor a guarded glance.

"As to your earlier statement, we have no intention of having you 'defect' to our side and spout Klingon rhetoric. That has already been done. We will not try it again. Right now the Federation has only suspicions . . . and there is no one who is aware of what has happened to you."

"So why do you need me?" Kirk asked, now becoming puzzled.

"Do not underestimate yourself. You are a powerful enemy. Your knowledge of Starfleet will be of great benefit to us. I am sure we can find many uses for you after your transformation."

"Many uses?"

Kor smiled as he strode over to the human and gently moved his hand across Kirk's face, then down his back. He put his arm tightly around Kirk's waist as his mouth moved to the human's ear. Kor whispered seductively, "You are very beautiful. You would make a most worthy bed slave."

Kor was surprised at how fast the injured human could move, as Kirk's fist caught the Klingon in the jaw. Kor found himself sprawled awkwardly on the floor, an angry Kirk standing above him.

"Try nothing else, human!" Kor warned, realizing that he was suddenly fearful for his life. "I am stronger than you, weakling. Touch me again and you die!" He was surprised to see Kirk smile.

"So?" the human asked quietly.

"I don't understand."

"Sometimes death is preferable, Kor." Kirk's face was sad as he glanced away. Kor took the opportunity to kick swiftly, throwing Kirk off balance. He fell to the floor and Kor was immediately on top of him, clutching his throat.

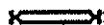
"So you want to die! Shall I kill you now?" Klingon and human locked gazes. A war raged in Kirk's mind. There must be a way to escape from the Klingons. Spock said there were always alternatives! "So you wish to live," Kor smiled, pushing himself

off Kirk and standing up. "Good!" Kor turned his back to the human and walked toward the cell door. "Food will be brought to you. This time you will eat it. If you do not cooperate, we will feed you forcibly."

Kirk lay on the floor, feeling too weak to get up. Kor left the cell. Once outside, Kor leaned back against the bulkhead in defeat. He could almost have killed the human, he realized, as an act of kindness. He did not wish to see Kirk become a . . . what had he called it? A zombie? Kor wiped the perspiration off his forehead.

Inside the cell, Kirk lay trembling, eyes shut tightly. Maybe he should have goaded Kor into killing him! Just get it over with! Anything would be better than living with the Klingons as a . . . a . . . He let the thought recede as he felt a new inner strength come to him. No, damn it! he thought. I won't give up yet! There's got to be a way . . . "Spock!" he moaned out loud.

Suddenly warmth moved across the gentle mind link. He knew without question that Spock was alive! Kirk slowly sat up, holding his ribs. He felt deliriously happy. Spock was alive! Nothing else mattered!



McCoy applied three hard slaps. Spock opened his eyes to find that he was in sickbay. The Vulcan frowned. "How long, Doctor?"

"Sixteen hours, Spock," McCoy informed him. "Sulu found the communications jammer on Regus II just an hour after you went into your healing trance. He eliminated it."

"I hope he merely disconnected it. The device would be worthy of study."

McCoy's face reddened. "Actually, he killed it."

"Killed it?"

"He phasered it out of existence! We didn't have time to wait around! Jim . . ."

"A logical decision, Doctor. And O'Doud?" Spock questioned. "What have you ascertained? Did you do a medical check on him?"

"Of course I did, Spock! It took a lot of time, but we finally found some minute differences in the tracing of his brain wave pattern."

"Then we are 'on the right track', as you would say?"

"Most definitely. Spock . . ."

The Vulcan got to his feet. "You have matters well in hand," Spock stated flatly. "I must go now."



"Go? Go where?"

"To save the captain, Doctor."

McCoy chewed on his lower lip as he rocked back on his heels. "How do you propose to do that, Spock?"

"I intend to go after him."

"Spock!" McCoy cried, but the Vulcan was already gone.



"Mr. Spock!" Uhura exclaimed, turning from her communications console. "You're well!"

"Obviously, Lieutenant," he stated as he took his seat in the command chair. "I want ship-wide communication."

Uhura looked surprised, but pushed the proper buttons. "Ship-wide, sir."

"Sir," Sulu interrupted, "Lt. O'Doud is being held in the brig."

"I am aware of that fact, Mr. Sulu. Your actions are to be commended." The young helmsman looked pleased as he turned back to his board.

"Attention all personnel," the Vulcan began. "I am dedicating this vessel to a rescue mission. The Klingons have captured Captain Kirk. His recovery must be immediate. The captain's life is in grave danger."

Spock paused, then continued levelly, "In order to rescue the captain, we must proceed into enemy territory. There is only a small chance that we will succeed. I do not have Starfleet's permission, as there is little chance that they would give it. On my own initiative, I am devoting the *Enterprise* to Captain Kirk's rescue."

Spock could feel the astonished eyes of the bridge crew fasten on him. "We have enough extra supplies to furnish 300 of you with food and provisions. You will be beamed down to Regus II, to remain there until the return of this ship. Should we not return within a month's time, you will contact Starfleet for rescue pickup. Everyone who wishes to beam down to Regus II should contact Lt. Uhura. She will coordinate activities."

"Remember, we are about to engage in an unauthorized rescue attempt. We will no doubt answer to Starfleet, should we survive. No reprimands will be issued to those who choose to stay behind. Spock out."

"Mr. Spock!" Sulu cried, but the Vulcan ignored him as he walked toward the turbolift.

"Lt. Uhura, I shall be in my quarters," Spock stated. "I will return in one hour and 15 minutes. At that time, I wish to have a list of all who are going ashore and all those who wish to remain. We may be working with a skeleton crew."

"Yes, Mr. Spock," she replied as the Vulcan disappeared into the lift.



"Well, Kirk. Welcome to Krymet," Kor said expansively. "And welcome to our Risastet."

"Your what?" Kirk asked with curiosity.

"It is our governing house, the most magnificent edifice on our home planet!"

Kirk stared up at the massive building before him. It was constructed of something resembling marble -- and was certainly impressive.

"The Emperor is staying here," Kor whispered. "He rarely stays planet-side. He prefers ships."

"So why is he here?"

"For you, Captain. He wishes to meet you while you are still . . . yourself."

"I'm flattered," Kirk said sarcastically.

"Shall we go inside?"

"No thanks," the human replied, then added, "I'd rather not."

A guard growled low behind Kirk and gave the human a shove forward. Kirk shot an angry glance at the guard.

"Watch your mouth!" Kor warned. "My guards can be easily irritated." Kor walked inside the building, not deigning to look at the human. After all, there were four guards around Kirk. He could be little trouble.

Kirk had no choice but to move into the building. Another shove forced him into an elevator.

"Curious where we're going?" Kor asked.

"I'll find out soon enough."

"I thought we might take the time to let you visit an old friend." The elevator door hissed open and they walked down the corridor to a small room. A man sat watching a viewer, his back to the new arrivals. Kirk immediately recognized who he was.

"Bob" he called, walking toward the man. "Bob Wesley?"

Wesley turned around. A smile lit his face as he jumped to his feet, grabbing Kirk's hand and shaking it. "Jim Kirk!" Wesley cried. "I never thought I'd see you again!"

Kirk's expression held a look of bewilderment. Wesley seemed to be unchanged. Maybe the defection message was a fraud.

"Sit down, Jim," the Commodore invited, inclining his head to the chair nearest him. "And you gentlemen, also." He included the Klingons.

"We will stand, thank you," Kor replied, keeping his eyes on Kirk.

Kirk sat down with reluctance. He did not like having his back to the Klingons -- an old habit. He looked at Wesley with concern.

"Bob, I didn't expect to find you like this. You seem . . . perfectly all right."

"And I am, Jim," Wesley replied as he seated himself next to Kirk. "I'm glad you're here," Wesley continued. "The Klingons can use more men like us!" Kirk felt a cold chill come over him. Kor noticed that Kirk paled visibly. "Yeah, the Federation had quite a plot going to overthrow the Klingon Empire. Now we can defeat Starfleet," Wesley whispered conspiratorially.

"How?" Kirk asked in a soft voice.

"I've told them everything I know about Federation military weaknesses! I've even told them about the deployment of our ships. When you add your knowledge to mine, the Federation will be stopped! Their plot to overthrow the Empire will be finished. We will rule!"

"How did you hear about this plot?" Kirk asked.

Wesley's face held a look of confusion as he muttered, "I . . . I don't really remember." He paused, then continued, "But it's true!"

"What about Adrianna and Caron?" Kirk asked quietly.

"I will see my wife and daughter again after they've been freed from Federation tyranny."

Kirk sat forward, looking intently into Wesley's eyes. There was no sign of a drug. He gripped the Commodore's arms tightly and pleaded, "Bob! Remember who you are! One of our finest commanders. Think about your wife and daughter, man! They'll be forced to live their lives thinking that you're a traitor!"

Wesley sat contemplatively.

"Bob, you do remember Adrianna?"

"I remember," Wesley whispered.

"Listen to me. The Klingons have given you a drug! The things that you've been telling me aren't your thoughts -- they're the Klingons!"

Wesley pulled sway from Kirk's grasp, frowning. He said coldly, "You're not making any sense. The Klingons are my friends. I belong here."

"No!" Kirk protested. "They've made you think that! Try to remember! They injected you with a drug . . . and it hurt like hell. Do you remember that?"

The Commodore was lost in thought, then shook his head. "I don't understand what is the matter with you Jim. I've taken no drug."

Kirk sighed and sat back wearily.

"The Klingons are good people," Wesley continued. "They'll soon unite the UFP and the Empire into one government! Freedom for most of the galaxy! It's a worthy cause, and I'm glad to be a part of it!"

"You'll soon feel the same way, Captain," Kor said not unkindly.

Kirk glared at the Klingon, his eyes angry. He said bitterly, "Did you bring me here so that I can see my 'fate'?"

"No. I wanted you to see that the drug does no harm."

"No harm! You've taken his mind from him!"

"His mind is perfectly normal."

"Perfectly conditioned, you mean!" Kirk flared.

"What drug?" Wesley asked, confused. "What are you talking about, Kor?"

Kor put his hand on the Commodore's shoulder as he assured, "It does not concern you. You are aware that we are your friends."

"Of course," Wesley smiled.

"No, damn it! They're not!" Kirk exclaimed, jumping up and pushing the Klingon back. He grabbed Wesley's shoulders. "Listen to me, Bob! I'm your friend, and I'm telling you -- they've given you a drug! They . . . " A hard slap from one of the guards knocked Kirk back. Another slap and he was sprawled on the floor. He grabbed his side. The broken ribs still hurt.

"Jim!" Wesley cried, rising from his chair. He turned to Kor and demanded, "Why did your guard hit him?"

"Calm down, Commodore," Kor said in a soothing voice. "I'm afraid Captain Kirk has been a victim of Federation brain washing. He is not responsible for his actions. I must apologize for the guard. He was angered by Kirk's words."

Wesley sat back down in his chair and asked, "You will help Jim, won't you?" He shook his head sadly. "It's hard to believe that the Federation would stoop this low."

"Indeed it is. We will help him, Commodore."

Kor walked over to Kirk and reached down for him. With one powerful pull, he had Kirk on his feet. The captain grimaced with pain.

"Ribs still hurt?" Kor asked.

"No."

"Very well. It is time to leave. You will now meet our Emperor."

Kirk shot a glance at the guard who attacked him. He would love to return the favor! One good punch . . .

"Do not even think it, Kirk!" Kor laughed. "You would be no match for Klingons even if you were uninjured. Do not forget Klingon strength! Now, come."

Kirk walked to the door flanked by Kor and his guards. He paused and stared back at Wesley, who had returned to calmly watching his viewer.

"He is happy, Captain," Kor said quietly.

The rebellious look had fled from the human's eyes, and was replaced with one of sadness. He whispered, "And I'll be like that?"

"Yes. You'll be like Wesley." Kor's words held a note of pity.

Spock had spent the last hour in quiet meditation in his cabin. He used this time to test the strength of his mind link with Kirk. The link was still strong, even over so great a distance. The captain was alive and Spock would find him.

He got to his feet, his inner clock telling him it was time to return to the bridge. Spock walked out into the corridor, glancing once at the door next to his. The captain's cabin. He swallowed hard, then strode toward the turbolift. "Have you coordinated beam down to the planet, Lieutenant?" Spock asked as he walked onto the bridge.

"No, sir," Uhura answered, smiling.

"No?"

"There is no beam down, Mr. Spock. Everyone wishes to stay aboard."

"Lieutenant, they must be made to understand that this could be a suicide mission. I thought I made that clear to them earlier."

"Ve know that, sir!" Chekov said hotly. "But those Cossacks have taken our keptain, and ve aren't going to let them get by with it!"

"Captain Kirk has saved our lives a hundred times," Sulu added. "We choose to risk our lives -- and our careers -- to save his."

"It is not necessary that all personnel be involved in this rescue operation," Spock pointed out.

"No one wants to leave the ship," Uhura reiterated.

Spock fought to keep the emotion from his face. He was pleased with the crew of the *Enterprise* . . . and very proud of Kirk, who could command such loyalty.

"Very well. Then we shall begin our journey," Spock said, sitting in the command chair. "Mr. Sulu, heading 3.57 mark 2, directly into Klingon territory. Give her warp 7 when she'll take it."

"Aye, aye, sir!"

Uhura left her communications station and came down to stand next to Spock's side.

"Yes, Lieutenant?" he inquired.

"The Klingons have a big part of the galaxy, Mr. Spock," she stated. Concern was evident in her voice. "How can we find Captain Kirk?"

"I know exactly where he is."

"Where?"

Spock sighed. "On Krymet, deep within Klingon territory."

"And the Klingon ships, Mr. Spock? How do you expect to avoid them?"

"I do not expect to avoid them, Lieutenant."

"You're very encouraging, Mr. Spock," Uhura said under her breath as she returned to her communications console.

The Klingon Emperor was a large, stately man. His imposing figure commanded authority, the black eyes blazed with power. The man appeared past middle age, yet he was well muscled and obviously strong. He regarded Kirk silently. The human did not flinch under his gaze.

"So, you are Captain Kirk," the Emperor stated in a deep voice. "You are very small. I expected you to be more formidable." He walked around the human, silently appraising him, then looked at Kor. "You and two guards will remain," the Emperor ordered. "Be seated Kirk, Commander Kor. You guards -- keep your weapons on the human at all times."

"Why bother?" Kirk asked sarcastically as he took his seat at the large table. "I'm not very 'formidable'."

The Emperor looked surprised, then laughed. "Only in stature, Kirk! You have been quite a challenge to our Empire. It will be good to have you on our side!"

"Never!"

"There is no choice for you, Captain. After we are done speaking, you will be given the fourth injection."

"And then?"

"We will keep you imprisoned for three weeks, at which time your body will be able to accept the full dosage. We will then administer the final shot of the Ryxigen. Then you will be ours."

Kirk added, "To spend the rest of my life here."

"It is not so bad, Kirk," Kor volunteered. "You saw that Commodore Wesley is quite content."

"Yeah -- I saw!" Kirk's eyes blazed.

"I would have you interrogated now," the Emperor said, "but there would be little point. You Federatii are well trained. We Klingons are patient. There is much knowledge to be gained from you. We are aware that you are among the most brilliant commanders of your race. In one month's time, you will tell me everything I wish to know. And you will be happy to do so."

Kirk sat quietly. He did not want to admit defeat, but he knew there was no hope for him. Bob Wesley was proof of that.

"You are very silent," the Emperor observed. "Do you not wish to speak more of what will happen to you?"

"Why should I? According to you, in another month I'll be some mindless creature sitting alone in a little room and staring at a holoviewer!"

The Emperor laughed. "No, not such a dull life as that! I have other plans for you, little one!"

Kirk looked up at him in alarm. "You said he was my prisoner, my responsibility!" Kor began to protest.

"Silence! He is your responsibility until his final injection of Ryxigen. Then he is mine."

"What the hell do you mean?" Kirk demanded.

"Ah, the fire returns to your eyes!" the Emperor smiled. "I find you appealing, Kirk. I will have you for my personal slave. Your life will be most interesting."

"Personal slave?"

"He means his pleasure slave," Kor said quietly. "I believe you know the definition of pleasure?"

Kirk jumped to his feet and shouted, "I won't be your goddamned whore!" He was pushed roughly back down by the guards.

The Emperor looked curiously at the human, then turned to Kor. "It is too bad we must subdue this one. I find his spirit intriguing."

A light blinked on the desk panel. "They will be ready for you shortly in the medical section, Kirk," the Emperor stated. Then the dark eyes lit enthusiastically as he continued, "After you are through suffering the effects of the injection, we shall talk. Perhaps I should not wait until you are controlled to take you. I believe I should enjoy the challenge you would present now. No, I do not want to wait . . . "

The Emperor smiled as Kirk was led away. "You are most appealing, little one!" he said to the human's back.

Kirk was both angry and frightened as he marched down the corridor. Kor walked beside him. Two guards walked with him, one in front and the other in back. There could be no escape. Kor was silent, sensing the human's need for thought. Kirk closed his eyes for a moment. He could sense the Vulcan's presence in his mind. At least Spock was alive and safe! Too bad he was going to have to prove his friend wrong — there aren't always alternatives.

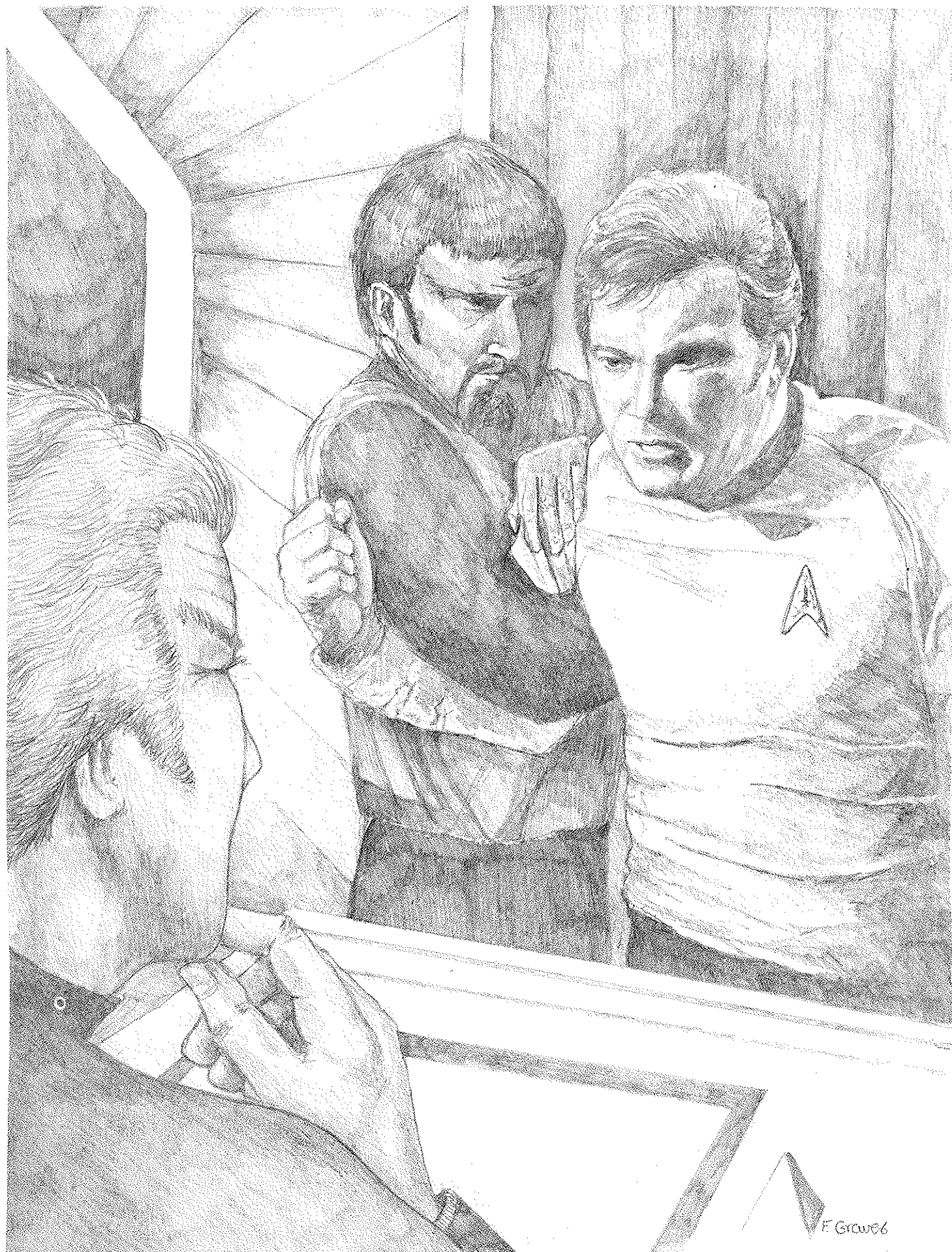
But then, maybe Spock wasn't wrong. True, his alternative wasn't a very good one — but anything was preferable to being forced to live like . . .

"Stop here," Kor ordered, breaking Kirk from his reverie. "Here you will be given the injection." They walked into a small room, filled with strange equipment. No one else was in the room. Kirk brushed his hand over his eyes and stepped back dizzily, holding his ribs with the other arm.

"What is the matter?" Kor questioned.

"My ribs hurt like hell! I think I'm going to . . . " Kirk started to fall to the ground. Kor reached out to grab him. Off balance by Kirk's weight, Kor staggered





slightly. Instantly, Kirk reached down and grabbed the hidden dagger from Kor's boot. He was relieved to find that Kor carried the traditional weapon.

Lightning-like, the knife was at Kor's throat. "Drop your weapons, or he dies!" Kirk ordered. At Kor's slight nod, the guards obeyed.

"There is no way out, Kirk," Kor said evenly, controlling his fear. "Even if you kill all of us, there is no way to escape."

"I realize that," the captain said calmly. "I don't intend to kill any of you."

"Then -- what?"

"I only have one way of escape," Kirk whispered as he drew the dagger away from Kor's throat. Kirk swiftly threw the Klingon forward.

Kor had no time to react as Kirk drew the knife quickly across his left wrist, then up to his jugular vein. He made one swift stroke.

The human fell to the ground, laying in a pool of his own blood.



Spock sat upright in the command chair, an unhidden expression of terror on his face.

"What is it?" McCoy asked in concern.

"The captain!"

"What about Jim, Spock?"

"I do not know. The link . . . "

"Tell me, dammit!"

"Mr. Spock! Enemy vessel heading for us at warp 5! Course 6.8 mark 3," Chekov announced.

The Vulcan still sat white-faced and stunned.

"Spock! Snap out of it!" McCoy ordered.

"They're closing fast!"

The Vulcan swallowed hard, then gazed around the bridge as though to get his bearings.

"Shall I open communications, Mr. Spock?" Uhura asked.

"N-no, Lieutenant," Spock said softly, then took a deep breath. "Mr. Sulu, plot course to intercept. Mr. Chekov, man weapons stations. Bring all tubes to bear."

"What're we gonna do, Spock?" McCoy asked. "Run up to them and blast them out of the sky?"

"That is my intention, Doctor. We have no time to waste."

"Then I damn well better get sickbay ready!" McCoy stated as he walked briskly to the turbolift. As the lift doors opened, McCoy hesitated. He turned and asked, "What about Jim, Spock?"

The Vulcan did not answer.



Eight hours had passed. Kor stood staring down at the pale human as he lay unmoving on the bed. Kirk was on full life support, a transparent mask covering his mouth and nose. There was an angry red scar on the human's neck, left by the laser sealer. Kirk's face was damp with sweat. Even the long eyelashes were wet. Kor reached out and touched Kirk, brushing back the soaked hair.

"It is time to see if he can breathe on his own," a voice said from behind Kor.

Kor jumped at the sound, then was embarrassed at having been observed.

Dr. Rynon moved Kor to the side, then skillfully ran a scanner over his patient. "He is somewhat stronger. I believe he may be able to breathe on his own."

"Why not keep him on full life support?" Kor asked.

"He will gain strength more quickly on his own," the older man explained. "He has lost too much blood. His life is in more danger on life support. We need him to fight for his own survival."

"Are you insane?" Kor cried. "He's here because he tried to kill himself! Why would he fight to live now?"

The doctor smiled. "The survival instinct. It will be some time before he is able to come to complete awareness. In this state, he will not realize where he is or what has happened to him. He is very weak."

"Then why not a transfusion to give him blood?"

"Kor, you are not a doctor!" Rynon snapped. "We have no human blood. Wesley's does not match. And you can see how he reacts from the use of the Rigellian blood builder. He still suffers a high fever."

"Why?"

"I had not tried it on a human. His reaction was severe."

"Has the Emperor been here?"

"Yes. I thought he would be angry at what the human did. Instead, he appeared impressed."

"It was fortunate for Kirk that when he tried his little trick, he was already in the medical ward," Kor said thoughtfully.

"And fortunate that I entered the room just as he fell, and that a laser sealer was nearby to stop the blood loss." Rynon added, "Most fortunate for you, also. The Emperor would not have been pleased with Kirk's death."

Kor looked startled, then asked, "But he still may die?"

"Yes. He has no strength and the fever is great." The doctor ran the scanner once more over Kirk. He reached out and adjusted some knobs on the side of the bed. Rynon met Kor's gaze. Life support was off.

Kirk still lay unmoving. He was not breathing.

"Do something!" Kor ordered.

The doctor shook his head and said quietly, "Wait."

Kor reached down and grabbed the human's bare shoulders. He shook him roughly. "Breathe!" he ordered. "Breathe!"

After several seconds, Kirk's chest began to rise and fall irregularly. "We've done it!" Kor beamed. "He fights to live!"

Dr. Rynon moved his scanner up and down Kirk's body. "Yes, he fights," the doctor murmured. "But he may not be strong enough to win. I shall have someone with him at all times. If his condition worsens, he must go back on life support."

Kirk moaned softly, still deeply unconscious. The doctor knew the fever was rising. He should never have tried anything Rigellian on a human.

"Doctor!" Kor suddenly exclaimed, remembering the reason for his being in the medical ward in the first place. "The Ryxigen! He must be given the injection within the next eleven hours!"

Rynon turned and held Kor's gaze. "It will kill him."

"But if he fails to receive the injection . . ."

"We will simply have to start over again. It will be easier for us to administer the drug with Kirk kept here as a prisoner."

There was another moan from the bed as the captain weakly turned his head from side to side. The human tried with obvious effort to move his arms and legs, but could not.

"Delirium," the doctor explained, never taking his eyes from his patient. "The fever rises."

Kor stood watching helplessly. Rynon left Kirk's side for a moment. He returned with a hypo filled with a clear fluid. "What is that?" Kor asked. "Are you going to be foolish enough to put another untested drug in his body?"

Rynon hid his surprise. So even the Commander was aware that he had been unwise in trying the Rigellian blood builder. But Kirk would have died right then if he hadn't! At least the builder produced some blood for the human's survival . . . before the reaction set in and it had to be quickly withdrawn.

"I must bring down the fever, Kor," the doctor said sharply. "You may leave now."

"I will stay," Kor mumbled.

The doctor pressed the hypo into Kirk's arm. Rynon barely acknowledged Kor's presence as he walked to the other side of the room. He returned with a pan of cold water and a wash cloth. Rynon dipped the cloth in the water and rung it out. He carefully began washing the human's chest, which was thick with sweat.

"What are you doing?" Kor asked. "Bathing him?"

The doctor grimaced. "I am attempting to cool down his body. The drug I gave him will take time to have an effect."

Kirk groaned, his head still turning from side to side. The human was obviously exerting a great deal of effort to regain consciousness.

Rynon again dampened the cloth and began sponging Kirk's face.

"Stay still, Kirk," the doctor whispered. "Do not struggle."

The human did not obey. He fought hard until his eyes finally flickered open. Rynon found himself staring into hazel eyes showing disorientation. The human tried to speak, but it seemed to take all his strength just to keep his eyes open.

"Be still," the doctor instructed, touching the side of Kirk's face. "You are safe." The large eyes still held a bewildered look. It was clear that Kirk was not aware of his surroundings. The doctor was relieved.

The human's eyes slowly closed as he lay in utter exhaustion. He fell into a feverish sleep.

"If you wish to be of help," Rynon said to Kor, "Get Kentyr and Rhan. I will need assistance."

"The fever?"

The doctor ran his scanner over Kirk. "The fever is breaking. He now has a chance."

Kor sighed in relief as he left to find the two doctors. Perhaps Kirk would live! In the hallway he paused in confusion. Kirk was a human -- the enemy . . . a man he was trained to hate. Why did he feel differently about this one?

From their initial meeting on Organia, he had held this particular human in high esteem. The past few days had not changed his respect for Kirk, only strengthened it. He stood rubbing his chin, wondering how he would react under the same circumstances. If he were drugged and spirited into Federation territory, would he have been able to show the same amount of courage?

Kor straightened, taking a deep breath. Of course he would be as courageous! He was a Klingon! He began to stride boldly down the corridor, looking for Rynon's assistants.



"Have all damage control parties reported, Lt. Uhura?" Mr. Spock asked.

"Yes, sir. We suffered only minor hits. Repairs are being effected."

"Then we still have warp drive and weaponry?"

"Yes, sir."

Spock glanced at the viewscreen to see the Klingon warship listing in space at an awkward angle. "Resume our previous heading, Mr. Sulu. Warp 7 as soon as possible."

"Mr. Spock!" Chekov exclaimed. "We have badly damaged the Klingon ship! What about survivors? Do we leave them?"

"Yes. We will leave them. There is little time left to rescue the captain. Mr. Sulu, take us out at warp 1."

"Aye, sir."

Spock's intercom blinked. "Spock here."

"If you're through shakin' the ship around, I'd like to have a word with you," requested the gruff voice.

"I am quite finished, Dr. McCoy. What do you wish to discuss?"

"Not over the comm, you . . . Vulcan! I'd like to see you in sickbay!"

"I have no time, Doctor."

There was a brief pause of silence. Then McCoy said softly, "Jim would be down to review the casualties."

Spock sighed. Why did McCoy always expect him to act as his captain would? Jim was . . . Jim. There was no other like him.

"Very well, Doctor. I am on my way."



"I am pleased that no one suffered serious injury," Spock stated.

"Me, too. But that's not why I called you down here." McCoy said flatly. "I want to talk with you about your actions."

"You mean the fact that I attacked the Klingon ship? That was unavoidable."

"Like hell it was! We could have tried to outrun them. Jim would have."

"You do not know what the captain would have done. I have no time to play 'cat and mouse' with a Klingon ship."

"That's another thing I want to talk to you about -- your obsessive behavior."

"Vulcans do not have obsessions," Spock pointed out.

"No? Well I think you do have one -- Jim Kirk."

"Your statement is illogical."

"Illogical, hell!" McCoy flared. "You've put this ship and 400 crewmen on the line to save Jim. You're so damn sure you can find him with this 'link'!"

"I can."

"But you're not telling me everything, Spock. I saw your expression earlier when you were on the bridge. Something's happened to Jim, hasn't it?"

"Yes, Doctor."

"For someone who normally talks a lot, you're not saying much now. What's happened?"

"For a moment, I believed him to be dead."

"What? You still fought the Klingon ship . . . in spite of the fact that you felt Jim was dead!"

"I hoped my 'feelings' were in error. They were. The captain is alive."

"You're sure, Spock?"

"Absolutely."

McCoy let out a sigh of relief. "So we're gonna continue to fight our way to this planet you think he's on?"

"The planet's name is 'Krymet', Doctor. The captain is being held there." Spock turned and walked toward the door. He stopped, keeping his back to McCoy. "Understand, Leonard. We will fight our way there, if necessary. This ship is committed. What is necessary, I will do. I will not lose Captain Kirk to the Klingons."

"And once we get there -- then what?"

Spock made no answer as he left the room.

"Yeah, Spock," McCoy muttered. "Vulcans don't have obsessions . . . in a pig's eye!"



"I am pleased that you are better," the Emperor said as he sat next to Kirk's bed. "Your action surprised me. I find you most interesting."

"I can't tell you how happy that makes me."

The Emperor laughed as he reached out and ran his hand gently down the side of the human's face. Kirk turned his head away from the touch.

"I have been assured that in another week you will be recovered," the Emperor smiled. "I have . . . plans for you."

"I'm sure you do. I don't think I want to hear them."

"I'm sure you don't." The Emperor continued the exploration with his hand. He touched the scar on Kirk's throat, then began running his fingers over the humans' chest.

"Keep your goddam hands off me!" Kirk blazed, trying to sit up. The effort cost him too much. He fell dizzily back on the pillow, breathing heavily.

"Do you think you can give an Emperor orders, little one?" the Klingon asked. "No you do not anger me. I like to see the fire in your eyes! In some ways, I am pleased you did not receive the fourth injection. It will be interesting to start over."

"Start over?"

"Were you not told? The drug is out of your body. When you are stronger, we will begin to administer the Ryxigen again."



"I can hardly wait."

A small Klingon burst into the room. "My Lord!" he cried. "There is an invader in our space! Commander Kor is monitoring communications!"

"Tell Kor I will be there at once! And, Myrn, send the guards back in. I wish this one to be watched closely." The Emperor stood staring down at the human. He took Kirk's jaw roughly and turned his head so that their eyes met. "Our discussion is not ended," the Emperor promised. "After we dispatch the invader, I will return."

Kirk's eyes smouldered.

The Emperor smiled as he left the room.



"What is the estimated arrival time?" Kor was speaking into the intercom as the Emperor entered the room.

"Twenty hours."

"And our fleet? What is their distance?"

"They are scattered. We had not anticipated an attack. The nearest ship is the K'Mara. She can be here in 23 hours."

"Not soon enough!" Kor growled.

"Who will be here in 20 hours?" the Emperor asked calmly.

"My lord! I did not see you enter!" Kor exclaimed, jumping to his feet and bowing awkwardly.

"Who is the 'invader'?"

"It is the Enterprise!"

"The Enterprise? In Klingon space? Impossible!"

"It is true," Kor stated. "The Federation ship was identified when they attacked the Rhanshaka. The Enterprise is heading here at warp 7!"

"And the Rhanshaka?"

"The ship is badly damaged. A rescue is necessary."

"The rescue will have to wait!" the Emperor said sharply. "Have you called in the fleet?"

"They are on the way."

"But the *Enterprise* will be here first."

Kor nodded.

"We have enough small ships to defeat the Federatii ship," the Emperor stated thoughtfully. "Have them prepare for battle."

"It is being done, Lord."

"I do not understand," the Emperor muttered. "What can be their plan?"

"To take Kirk. The Federatii are very loyal."

"But not to this extent! They have no chance!"

"They will try anyway."

"Ridiculous!" the Emperor raged. "See to all defenses. You are in charge, Kor. Make no errors!"

"I will not, my Lord."

"Advise me when defenses are ready. I will be in my chambers." The Emperor left the room, shaking his head in annoyance and muttering, "Ridiculous!"

The *Enterprise* assumed orbit around Krymet. Fifty small ships immediately surrounded the starship, all weapons ready.

Kor sat at the communications station in the Emperor's quarters. The Emperor himself stood behind the viewer keeping out of sight. He did not wish to let the Federatii know he was on the planet. Kor must deal with them. "This is Kor, military commander of Krymet. Explain your presence here!"

"This is Spock, temporarily in command of the *Enterprise*."

Kor jerked back in surprise as the Vulcan's face appeared on the view screen. "You're not dead!"

"Obviously, Commander."

Kor sat back thoughtfully. If Spock were alive on Regus 11, he had probably overheard his conversation with Kirk. That would explain Spock's presence in orbit around Krymet. But the Vulcan had been severely injured. He could not have heard!

"State your purpose here!"

"I want Captain Kirk returned to this vessel immediately."

"Captain Kirk is not here."

"He is," Spock said flatly.

Kor smiled. "It is of no matter. Our ships have you surrounded. They will destroy you!"

"I think not," Spock said calmly. "With our shields up, it would take over two hours to render this ship incapacitated. Before that time, your planet will be destroyed."

"What?"

"Our phasers have been locked automatically on all your major cities. Your planet will be levelled."

"You cannot do this! I know the rules of your Federation!"

"Our presence here alone proves that we are not playing by the rules," Spock said mildly. "I want my captain returned immediately."

Kor closed off communications and looked up at the Emperor. What could they do? The Emperor turned to one of his guards. "Get Kirk up here!" he snapped. Then he turned back to Kor and ordered, "Stall them!"

Kor sat back heavily. He reopened communications. "Do not fire on us, Vulcan!" he said threateningly. "You forget that if you destroy us, you destroy Kirk as well."

"I do not forget, Commander. If you fail to return my captain, there will be no choice. I give you five minutes for your decision." Communications were shut off by the *Enterprise*.

"Well, Mr. Chekov?" Spock asked.

"I still have not been able to locate the keptain on scanners," he reported. "There is some kind of blocking device that makes scanning difficult."

"But not impossible."

"No, Mr. Spock. Ve'll find him."

"Good. Lt. Uhura, is the transporter room ready to lock onto Captain Kirk at my signal?"

"They are."

"Then we wait."



Kirk was hauled roughly into the Emperor's chambers. The human shivered in the thin jumpsuit he was wearing.

"Sit down here," Kor ordered, pointing to the chair in front of the viewer. "Guards, stand next to him. Point your disruptors at his head."

Kirk said nothing, but the large hazel eyes showed confusion.

"The **Enterprise** is here, Kirk," the Emperor stated.

"The **Enterprise**?"

"Yes. Spock threatens to destroy this planet if you are not released to them."

"Spock said that?" Kirk felt weak and dizzy. Maybe this was another Klingon trick.

"You must order the ship away," the Emperor continued. "If they do not comply, I will order my ships to open fire."

Kirk sat back tiredly in the chair, running his hand over his eyes. "Let me talk to Spock," he said wearily.

Kor reached over and pushed a button on the console. "Commander Kor to **Enterprise**."

"Spock here," the Vulcan's face appeared on the viewer.

"Spock!" Kirk cried. "It's true!"

Kirk could see Spock visibly relax, a look of relief on his face. "You are alive," Spock observed. Only Kirk noticed the tremor in the voice.

"Yeah," the captain smiled. "But what are you doing here?"

Spock carefully regarded his friend's face. Jim was ill and trying to hide it. "We have come to rescue you."

"You can't risk the ship for me!"

"I already have."

"Commander Spock," Kor interrupted. "Do not attempt to beam your captain aboard. As you can see, my guards have weapons aimed at Kirk's head. Any attempt by you to beam him aboard your vessel will result in his death."

"Time grows short," the Vulcan stated. "Will you release Captain Kirk to us?"

"Never!" Kor growled.

"Then we all die."

"Spock -- don't do this!" Kirk pleaded. "I'm ordering you to turn the ship around and get the hell out of here!"

"It is too late, Captain. The Klingon fleet has been alerted and is heading our way."

Kirk leaned back tiredly and closed his eyes. His ship would be destroyed! Why, Spock? One man wasn't worth so much!

"Will you capitulate?" Spock addressed Kor. "We have no more time to wait."

"What shall we do?" Kor asked, looking at the Emperor.

The Emperor looked pensive, then replied evenly, "We release Kirk."

"We what?"

"It is of little consequence. The fleet will be near enough to destroy the Enterprise. We cannot risk annihilation of this planet."

"But . . . to give in to the Federatii!"

"We must give in to win. The Federatii will die. They cannot escape. And we will live."

Kor glared at the Emperor, open hostility in his eyes. "Too bad, Kirk," the Emperor smiled. "I would have enjoyed you. Now you must die."

"I'd rather be dead than turned into a . . . robot Klingon!" the human stated.

The Emperor laughed again. "Yes, I would have enjoyed you greatly!" He turned to Kor. "Open communications. Tell the Enterprise they will have their captain."

The screen flashed on. "Kor here. We agree to release Captain Kirk, if you assure us that you will not attack this planet."

"We will not attack," Spock said calmly, masking his elation. "You have my word."

"Spock," Kirk broke in. "Bob Wesley is here, too."

"Commodore Wesley is on Krymet?"

"Yes. In this building."

"Be quiet!" Kor ordered.

"The hell I will!" Kirk flared. "I'm not going to leave Wesley behind!" Kirk's neck snapped back as a guard hit him hard across the face, leaving an angry red mark.

Spock rose quickly from his chair asking shakily, "Are you all right, Captain?"

Kirk sat quietly for a moment, his head spinning. He answered, "Yeah, Spock. I'm all right. But we can't leave Wesley here!"

"Quite correct, Captain," Spock replied, authority returning to his voice. "Commander Kor, you will also return Commodore Wesley to us."

"That wasn't part of our agreement!"

"It is now."

"Perhaps we will just kill Kirk now and be done with it," Kor threatened.

Only Kirk was aware of the fear in the Vulcan's eyes. "Don't worry, Spock," Kirk smiled. "I don't really think they have much choice. Destroy this planet and you destroy their Emperor."

"The Emperor is there?"

Kirk nodded.

Spock jumped forward as he saw one of the Klingon guards raise his fist to strike the captain.

"Do not touch him!" the Vulcan warned, anger in the words.

"Stop, Myrn!" Kor ordered. He glanced down at the human and said quietly, "There is no need to harm the captain further."

"Your answer, Kor? Will you also give us Wesley?"

Kor sighed. There was little use in further resistance. These impossible Federatii would all be dead soon! "We will have Kirk and Wesley beamed up immediately," he said flatly, closing communications.

"So, Kirk," the Emperor said. "It looks as though you will win the battle, but lose the war!"

Kirk got shakily to his feet, shivering in the thin material. "It's not over yet," he murmured.

Leonard McCoy was waiting in the transporter room as Kirk and Wesley were beamed aboard. He could not resist temptation as he ran up to Kirk and gave him a gigantic bear hug.

"Damn, Jim-boy! I never thought I'd see you alive again!" McCoy pushed himself back, still holding Kirk's shoulders. He could feel the shivering in the captain's body.

"What the hell?" McCoy asked, his eyes running over Kirk. "What'd they do to you? You're pale as a ghost! . . . And what's that?" McCoy pointed to the scar on his throat.

Kirk shakily stepped off the transporter platform and said to Kyle, "Tell Mr. Spock we're safely aboard -- and I want to get the hell out of here, best possible speed."

"Aye, Captain!" Kyle said, drinking in the sight of his very-much-alive commander. He immediately called the bridge, then advised, "We're leaving orbit now, sir."

"Is this another Federation plot?" Wesley asked, disorientated.

"What's the matter with him, Jim?"

"I'll explain later, Bones. Just take care of him. I'm going to the bridge."

"The hell you are!" McCoy protested. "You're heading for sickbay!"

"Don't fight with me, Bones," Kirk whispered, the hazel eyes pleading. "You know I have to try to get this ship to safety."

"Spock can . . ."

"It's my ship, Bones!" The captain walked toward the door of the transporter room, exhaustion evident in his steps.

"Wait a minute, Jim!" McCoy called. He walked over to the captain and touched the scar. "What about this? Did the Klingons try to slit your throat?"

Kirk smiled weakly. "No. I did."

Kirk left McCoy standing in surprise. "Oh, great!" the doctor muttered.



"What's your heading, Spock?" Kirk asked as he stepped onto the bridge. He shivered slightly and wished he'd had time to change out of the jumpsuit. The red alert light blinked rapidly on the wall behind him.

"Six point 2, mark 3, Captain," the Vulcan stated calmly. "A straight line for Federation territory." All eyes were on Kirk. He could feel the warmth of the crew's welcome surround him.

Spock vacated the command chair as Kirk walked slowly toward it. He stumbled slightly and Spock reached for him. "I'm okay," he smiled as he sat back in the chair. "Just a little tired."

"I think Dr. McCoy should . . . "

"Not now, Spock." The captain turned and regarded the bridge crew. "You did a good job," he acknowledged. "Thank you."

"Our pleasure, Captain!" Uhura beamed.

"Ve showed those Cossacks!" Chekov said proudly.

Kirk smiled, a look of concern on his face. "Now all we have to do is stay alive." He turned to Uhura and asked, "Did you monitor Klingon transmission?"

"Of course, Captain."

"Did you plot the direction of the transmissions to the Klingon fleet?"

"Yes, sir." Uhura looked puzzled.

"Punch up a schematic, Spock. I want to know where the ships were." Spock raised one eyebrow as he walked to his science console. The Vulcan's hand moved deftly over the controls. After a couple of minutes, Spock stated, "Schematic on screen."

The captain studied the viewscreen thoughtfully. Blinking lights accounted for each Klingon warship. There were 15 of them. "Project their course, Spock," He ordered. "If they were travelling at maximum warp to Krymet, where would they be now?"

Spock again moved his hands over the controls. A different schematic appeared.

"There, Spock!" Jim exclaimed excitedly. "See it? A hole!"

"A 'hole', Captain? I see an area where there are no ships, but . . . "

"We're gonna try to slip between their forces," Kirk explained. "Mr. Sulu, course 9.75 mark 10 . . . and cross your fingers!"

Sulu smiled as he turned to his board. It would take a miracle to get them out of this -- and Captain Kirk was good at miracles!



"Klingon battle cruiser closing, Captain," Spock announced. The Vulcan looked at Kirk in concern. The captain had been on the bridge for five hours and his fatigue was apparent. Spock could see the faint trembling in Kirk's body.

He looked at the blanket draped around Kirk and almost smiled as he recalled how Uhura earlier had come marching over to him with the blanket. The captain looked surprised as Uhura began tucking it around him. She had smiled at Kirk and said, "Cover up, sugah, or you're gonna catch cold!" The captain had been too embarrassed to respond.

"How far are we from the neutral zone?" Kirk asked, trying to keep the tiredness from his voice.

"Twelve parsecs."

"Too far. Damn! We're gonna have to fight! Are we ready, Scotty?"

"Aye, Captain. Ready as we'll ever be!"

"Full power to the shields. Mr. Chekov, plot a course to intercept. Man your weapons, Mr. Sulu."

A chorus of 'Ayes' answered in response.

McCoy suddenly burst onto the bridge. "What is this, Jim?" he demanded. "Do I have to physically drag you to sickbay?"

"When we're through the neutral zone, I'll go," Kirk answered tiredly. McCoy was disturbed. He had expected Kirk to put up a protest.

"I said now, Jim!"

"Bones!" Kirk said harshly, then caught himself. "We're going into battle. When we get through this and reach the neutral zone, I'll report. Not until then." There was steel in the captain's words.

"Do you have a plan, Captain?" Spock asked, stepping between Kirk and McCoy. He smiled at the Vulcan's intervention. "Yes. We're going to hit that ship with all we've got. Then run like hell for home! We don't have time for a long battle. The other Klingon ships are closing on us."

"And what if they hit us with all they've got?" McCoy asked.

"Then I guess that would ruin my plan."



McCoy shrugged. "Well, I guess I'd better get sickbay ready -- again."

"Wait, Bones. How is Bob?"

"I'm afraid we had to put him in a security cell for his own good. He wanted to take on the Federation single handedly!"

"How is he otherwise?"

"Perfect health."

Kirk took a deep breath. "Have you tested him to see how the drug works? If the effects can be neutralized?"

"We're workin' on it, Jim. If we make it to Federation space, it might be a good idea to drop the Commodore off on Sigma 8. They have the best medical team around."

"Except for the *Enterprise*," Kirk smiled. "I'll consider it."

"Closing on target!" Sulu announced.

McCoy headed swiftly for the turbolift and sickbay as Spock returned to his science station.

"C'mon, baby!" Scotty muttered from the engineering station. "We're gonna get those heathens!"

Kirk glanced at the Engineer, a smile lighting his eyes. Scotty looked somewhat sheepish as he explained, "A little pep talk to me bairns, Captain."

"Phasers locked on target," Sulu stated.

"Fire phasers, Mr. Sulu. Take six shots, then bring torpedoes to bear." The ship lurched suddenly, throwing Uhura to the floor. The Klingons had made the first strike.

"They scored a direct hit on us, Captain," Spock reported. "Damage Control, report."

"Torpedoes ready and armed."

Spock studied his scanners. "We've scored two direct hits with our phasers." The ship rocked again from the blast of the Klingon's weapons.

"Fire torpedoes, Mr. Sulu, then turn to 7.9 mark 3. Arm phasers and fire." Kirk ordered, then turned toward the science station. "Spock?"

"Direct hit by both torpedoes. Their number 4 shield is down."

"Good. Sulu, aim for number 4 shield."

"Firing."

There was a pause, then Chekov announced, "Ve got him, sir!"

"Well, Spock?"

"The Klingon vessel appears slightly damaged. They seem to have lost some of their mobility."

"Good enough!" Kirk said ecstatically. "Now let's see if we can outrun them! Mr. Sulu, make for the neutral zone, warp 7."

The minutes ticked by. There was silence on the bridge, except for Uhura's relaying of the damage control information. The **Enterprise** had not been severely damaged.

Kirk relaxed. They could do nothing now but wait. If they did not outrun the Klingon ship and make it to the neutral zone . . .

A half hour passed. Kirk fidgeted in his chair. He would like to be up and pacing the floor, but he realized that in his condition, he'd more likely fall on the floor! In exasperation, he asked, "Well, Spock?"

"Captain?"

"Are they still pursuing us?"

Spock stood facing Kirk, hands held behind his back. "I do not think we should fear pursuit, Captain."

Kirk shot his First Officer a puzzled look.

"As of approximately 2.57 minutes ago, we have outdistanced the Klingons. There are no ships ahead of us. Therefore, there is no chance that they can catch up to us before we reach the neutral zone. I believe the term is, 'we are home free'."

A chorus of cheers resounded around the bridge.

A look of relief appeared on Kirk's face. He sat back wearily, but his eyes sparkled. "I want all of you to know," Kirk said proudly, "that you did an excellent job. You've saved this ship. Now, I want all of you to get some rest! Call your backups to the bridge."

"Gladly, Captain!" Uhura laughed.

"And I want everyone to take the next 24 hours off," Kirk added, noticing the smiles directed his way.

"Captain, with your permission, I should like to accompany you to sickbay," Spock stated.

Now that the battle had ended, Kirk really began to feel his exhaustion. He admitted to himself that, for once, he was looking forward to a few hours in sickbay. He shook his head. "I know that we're probably safe, Spock, but I'm not willing to take any chances. I want you to take over the conn while I see McCoy."

The Vulcan swallowed hard and started to protest, but Scotty interrupted him. "I feel like takin' a little walk, Captain. Mind if I went along with you to sickbay?" Spock threw the Engineer a look of thanks.

Kirk rose from the chair. "Not at all, Scotty. I could use a little company." He took a step toward the Vulcan, then said in a near whisper, "I'll feel better knowing you're in command."

Spock's lips curved slightly upward. "I understand."

Kirk returned the smile, then slowly walked toward the turbolift. Before he entered the lift, a wave of dizziness assaulted him and he rested his hand against the wall, fighting it -- angered that his body seemed to be falling him now. When the dizziness subsided he turned, knowing the Vulcan was watching him. "It's nothing, Spock," he assured, managing a weak smile. "McCoy will fix me up."

"Captain?" Scotty asked. He was already in the turbolift waiting. When Kirk stepped inside, Scotty ordered, "Sickbay."

As the lift began to move, Kirk leaned back against the wall, pulling the blanket tightly around himself. He was beginning to feel dizzy again and the lights of the turbolift suddenly seemed too bright. He took a deep breath, fighting for control but his body began to tremble. He glanced at Scotty in alarm, realizing he was about to pass out.

"S-Scotty, I . . . "

The Engineer stepped over to Kirk and put his arms tightly around him. "It's all right, laddie," the Scotsman whispered. "I've got you."

Kirk was lifted and held securely in the engineer's arms as blackness overtook him.



Spock strode into sickbay and stopped in front of Kirk's bed. He glanced at the diagnostic panel, pleased with the readings, then at the human. "Dr. McCoy said you wish to speak to me in private, Captain."

Kirk was sitting up in the bed, a slight frown on his face. "How am I going to explain to Starfleet Command that you risked the ship and 400 lives to save me?"

"It was a logical decision on my part," Spock said evenly. "The Klingons could not be allowed to obtain your knowledge of the dispersal of our fleet, as well as other matters of military importance."

Kirk smiled. "That's a pretty logical reason to take on the Klingon Empire. And I thought you were behaving impetuously!" Spock raised both eyebrows in surprise. "Anyhow, we still have a problem." The smile vanished, replaced with a look of worry, as Kirk continued, "It sounds good enough now, but I do not think it'll hold water with Komack."

"I do not doubt that you are correct," Spock said. "However, as you humans are fond of stating, we shall cross that bridge when we come to it."

"Not without a little preparation first. By the way," Kirk said a little shyly, "I don't believe I got the chance to say thank you."

"It is quite understandable. You did have other matters on your mind."

"I still do . . . " Kirk sat up straighter in the bed and said in exasperation, "Do you know McCoy says I have to stay here another 24 hours? I think he enjoys bullying me!"

"That is hardly the case. The doctor is only concerned with your well-being. If he believes that you . . . "

"I don't need a lecture, Spock," Kirk interrupted. "The fact of the matter is that I feel fine. I can't take another hour in this place! Give me a hand." He turned and swung his legs off the side of the bed.

"Exactly what do you intend to do?"

"I'm gonna make my escape from sickbay. It shouldn't be as tough as Krymet!" he grinned. He stood, then took a hesitant step forward. "See? I'm fine. Will you help me get dressed?"

Spock signed inwardly. "Not until Dr. McCoy released you."

"Then I'll do it myself," Kirk shrugged. "I ought to know when I'm feeling well enough to leave."

"You said that two days ago when you were ready to fall on your face," McCoy pointed out as he quietly entered the room. "I gather your meeting is over?" Spock nodded. "Good. Then you can turn around and hop back into bed, Jim. You need more rest."

"I can rest in my quarters," Kirk said stubbornly.

"While you do your paperwork? Let me rephrase my suggestion . . . " McCoy glared at the captain and said in his most authoritative voice, "Get back to bed! Now!" Kirk started to protest but the look on McCoy's face stopped him. Instead, he obediently got back into bed and lay on his back, arms folded.

McCoy carefully pulled the covers over his patient. "I want you to go to sleep for a little while. If you're a good boy, I might let you out of here when you wake up."

Kirk's face brightened as he assured, "I'll be on my best behavior!"

"I should live long enough to see that," the doctor mumbled, then turned to Spock. "I think you'd better leave and let him get some rest."

"A wise suggestion. Sleep well, Jim." The Vulcan walked toward the door.

"Wait, Spock!" Kirk called. The Vulcan turned and faced him. "I just want to say thank you again . . . for everything."

Spock smiled. "You are quite welcome."



"It's called 'out of the frying pan and into the fire'," Kirk stated as he sat in the conference room, reading his newest orders.

"C'mon, Jim," McCoy protested. "Dealing with Komack can't be much worse than dealing with the Klingons!"

"Can't it?" the captain asked, a sarcastic note in his voice.

"You are not in trouble, Jim," Spock pointed out. "I am. This foray into Klingon territory was not your doing. I shall answer to the Admiral."

"And I don't like it one damn bit!"

"Keep your temper, Jim-boy," McCoy cautioned. "Now that you have some blood in you, you've got blood pressure to contend with!"

"I'm not concerned about that right now."

"Well, I am. I certified you fit for duty just to get you out of my sickbay! You're the worst patient on this whole ship!"

"Since I am certified for duty, I . . . "

"But you're still not 100%," McCoy stated. "When are you going to learn to listen to your doctor?"

Kirk smiled. "I always listen, Bones." McCoy rolled his eyes upward and sighed. "Anyway, Spock. We've got to think our way out of this one," Kirk stated.

"How can one 'think' one's way out of it?" Spock asked, puzzled. "I violated the neutral zone and entered enemy territory without authorization. We both know why Admiral Komack has ordered us to report to Starbase 12."

"He'll order you to have a general court-martial."

"Undoubtedly, Captain."

"How many days to the Starbase?"

"Three point 47."

"Well, that gives us a little time." Kirk said thoughtfully.

"For what, Captain?"

Kirk smiled as he said, "Remember, Spock. There are always alternatives!"



Kirk and Spock sat on the small couch in the reception area. Komack had kept them waiting there for over an hour. Kirk was becoming restless, tired of the silence.

"Remember the last time we were here, Spock?" he asked, trying to break the tension.

"Of course I remember."

"I wonder if Zarn and M'Laya ever resolved their differences?" Spock's eyebrows rose.

"Captain Kirk, Mr. Spock," the receptionist announced. "The Admiral will see you now. And . . . Captain," she added as they started to enter Komack's office. "I heard you mention Zarn and M'Laya . . ."

The captain turned to the woman. "Yes?"

"I don't suppose you know," she continued. "They weren't too pleased with their meeting with the Admiral. When he assigned them to different parts of the galaxy, they protested. In fact, they finally signed a five year contract."

"A contract?"

"A marriage contract," she smiled. "They seem to have resolved their differences!"

"Married!" Kirk exclaimed, then laughed out loud. Spock's face registered dismay.

Kirk was still laughing as they entered Komack's office.

Admiral Komack was taken aback by Kirk's merriment. He had deliberately kept them waiting. He wanted them tense and off balance. Now Kirk was acting like he did not have a care in the world!



Komack leaned back in his chair, hands across his stomach. He motioned to the two chairs opposite his desk and said, "Sit." It was not a request.

Kirk took a seat. Spock beside him.

"You know why you're here," Komack began. "I'm going to throw the book at you, Spock!"

Spock's eyebrows rose as he asked, "What book?"

Kirk tried to withhold his laughter, but failed. Tears came to his eyes and he wiped them away.

"Glad to see you're enjoying yourself, Captain," Komack muttered. Kirk sobered instantly. "There will be no charges brought against you, Kirk," Komack continued, "But I'm going to throw . . . I'm bringing serious charges against Mr. Spock. He's going to be court-martialed."

Captain Kirk frowned and said evenly, "No. I don't think so, Admiral. If there are any charges, they'll go against me, not Spock."

"Captain!" the Vulcan protested. "What . . . ?"

Kirk waved his hand to silence Spock, then continued, "You see, Admiral, I became aware that the Klingons were perpetrating a plot against the Federation. I'd had some encounters with them and realized that they were trying an elaborate type of brain washing."

"What are you talking about, Kirk?"

"Didn't you read my report? You should have had it a week ago."

"Of course I read it! You didn't mention that you were already aware of the plot before the Klingons took you prisoner!"

"Captain, I think . . . "

"Quiet, Spock! I may have overlooked putting some things into the report . . . I didn't know how widespread the mind wiping was," Kirk gazed up at the Admiral through his dark lashes. "So I decided to find out about it my own way."

"You what?"

"I felt the only way I could find out about it was to be taken prisoner by the Klingons. I gave Spock orders that he was to take the ship into Klingon territory and effect my rescue. Of course, Mr. Spock protested, but . . . "

"Captain!"

"I gave him direct orders -- not to be disobeyed. Spock wanted to get Starfleet's permission, but I couldn't afford the time. You'll find the ship's tapes confirm this."

"Captain! You doctored the tapes!" Spock said incredulously.

"Who? Me?" Kirk asked innocently.

"Admiral Komack, this is not true!" Spock protested. "Entering Klingon space was my idea alone. Captain Kirk had nothing to do with the decision. He was, in fact, a prisoner of the Klingons at that time."

"Are you saying Captain Kirk is a liar?" Komack asked with suspicion.

Spock swallowed hard. "I would not phrase it in that way, Admiral. Captain Kirk sometimes tends to be a bit overzealous and loyal. He is trying to protect me."

"Nonsense, Spock," Kirk stated, a hint of laughter in his eyes. "You'll find all the ship's records confirm that you went to Krymet on my personal orders."

"Captain, I will not allow you do this!"

"Both of you, stop it!" Komack growled. "If this is the way you want it, I'll bring you both up for court-martial!"

Kirk leaned back in his chair and said softly, "Only me."

He glanced surreptitiously at the Vulcan and saw the stubborn set of Spock's jaw, the outrage in his eyes. This might prove to be quite a battle!

There was a gentle knock at the door and the receptionist entered, carrying a tape. "I'm sorry to interrupt, Admiral, but this just came in. It's marked 'Urgent' and is from Admiral Nogura."

"Very well," Komack sighed. "Kirk, you and Mr. Spock wait outside."

"Sir," the woman interrupted. "It's addressed to the attention of all three of you."

Komack looked surprised. "All right, Elaine. Give it here." The woman deposited the tape onto Komack's desk and left.

"Why to all of us?" Komack asked more to himself than to the others. He looked suspiciously across the desk at Kirk.

"Of course, Kirk! You've always been Nogura's fair-haired boy!"

The captain felt himself blush. It was true, ever since his academy days. It had been said that Nogura wanted to groom him for the Admiralty. Not much of a chance of that happening now!

"Let's hear what he has to say," Komack said in a low voice as he inserted the disc into the vid-player.

Nogura's sanguine features appeared on the viewscreen. "Richard, Jim, Spock," he nodded as if in greeting. "My sources have told me that you'll all be together when this tape reaches you. I have something to say to you and Spock, Jim. Both of you are

far too headstrong and stubborn for your own good. You, Jim, are damn good at tearing into dangerous situations — and coming out smelling like a rose! Again, you've jumped in to 'save the Federation' without permission. I've taken this matter before Starfleet Command and brought to their attention all your past 'escapades'."

Nogura paused and Komack smiled gleefully. Kirk and Spock exchanged glances.

"Starfleet Command agrees with me, Jim," Nogura continued. "You two are the best men we have. In your type of job, you can't always wait for orders. Each time that you've acted on your own initiative, it has been to the good of the Federation."

"The medical station on Sigma 8 has reported a great improvement in Commodore Wesley's condition. They also report that they are near a breakthrough in detecting the drug Ryxigen. The Klingons will not be able to use it as a weapon against us."

"Starfleet is giving you and Spock its highest commendation. You are to report to Earth immediately to receive the UFP Starcluster."

The two **Enterprise** officers looked amazed. It was a rare award.

"I have a little advice for you, Jim," Nogura smiled. "Try to be somewhat more cautious. Danger has a way of finding you." Kirk felt himself redden as Spock nodded once in agreement.

"And, Richard . . . " Komack looked at the screen as though it were a venomous snake.

"Lay off Jim. You'll be facing him on even ground someday -- when he decides to try for the admiralty!"

"Take care Jim, Spock, Richard." Nogura signed off with a faint chuckle. The room was silent for a moment, heavy breathing coming from Komack's side of the desk. Kirk fought to control his expression as he gazed at Komack's red face.

"Well, you did it again, Kirk!" Komack stated bitterly.

"Is this meeting concluded?" Spock asked as he rose gracefully from his chair. Komack merely nodded.

"Very well," Spock said flatly. "I think we should leave, Admiral Kirk . . . pardon me, I mean Captain Kirk."

Spock strode from the room, Kirk bolting after him. Once outside, he leaned back against the wall, holding his ribs. He was overcome with laughter. "Did you see his face, Spock? You did that deliberately!"

"As you would say, 'Who, me?' He did seem somewhat irritated."

Kirk's fit of laughter finally subsided. He reached out and touched the Vulcan on the shoulder. "C'mon, Spock. Let's go home."

"I trust you will take Admiral Nogura's advice."

The human gave Spock a questioning look.

"He requested that you be more cautious," Spock explained. "The idea has much merit."

"Don't worry, Spock," Kirk smiled. "I'll manage to keep out of trouble."

The Vulcan raised both eyebrows. "You will make a most interesting admiral, Jim."

"An admiral? Who, me?" Kirk started laughing again as the two men walked down the corridor side by side.

# Rescue

Not just I, Spock who opted for the rescue  
Not the Admiral alone in mutiny,  
For your presence, your being, your essence,  
Has spurred all crew to stand in defiance.

Aye, voiced Mr. Scott, aye sir echoed Uhura,  
Sulu and Chekov following McCoy's lead.  
And in unison we all decided to return  
To accept whatever fate awaited.

A ship runs on loyalty to one man,  
I recall you once having stated.  
How true Mr. Spock, how true and ironic  
For you to find yourself, such a man.

- By: Cheryl Resnick



